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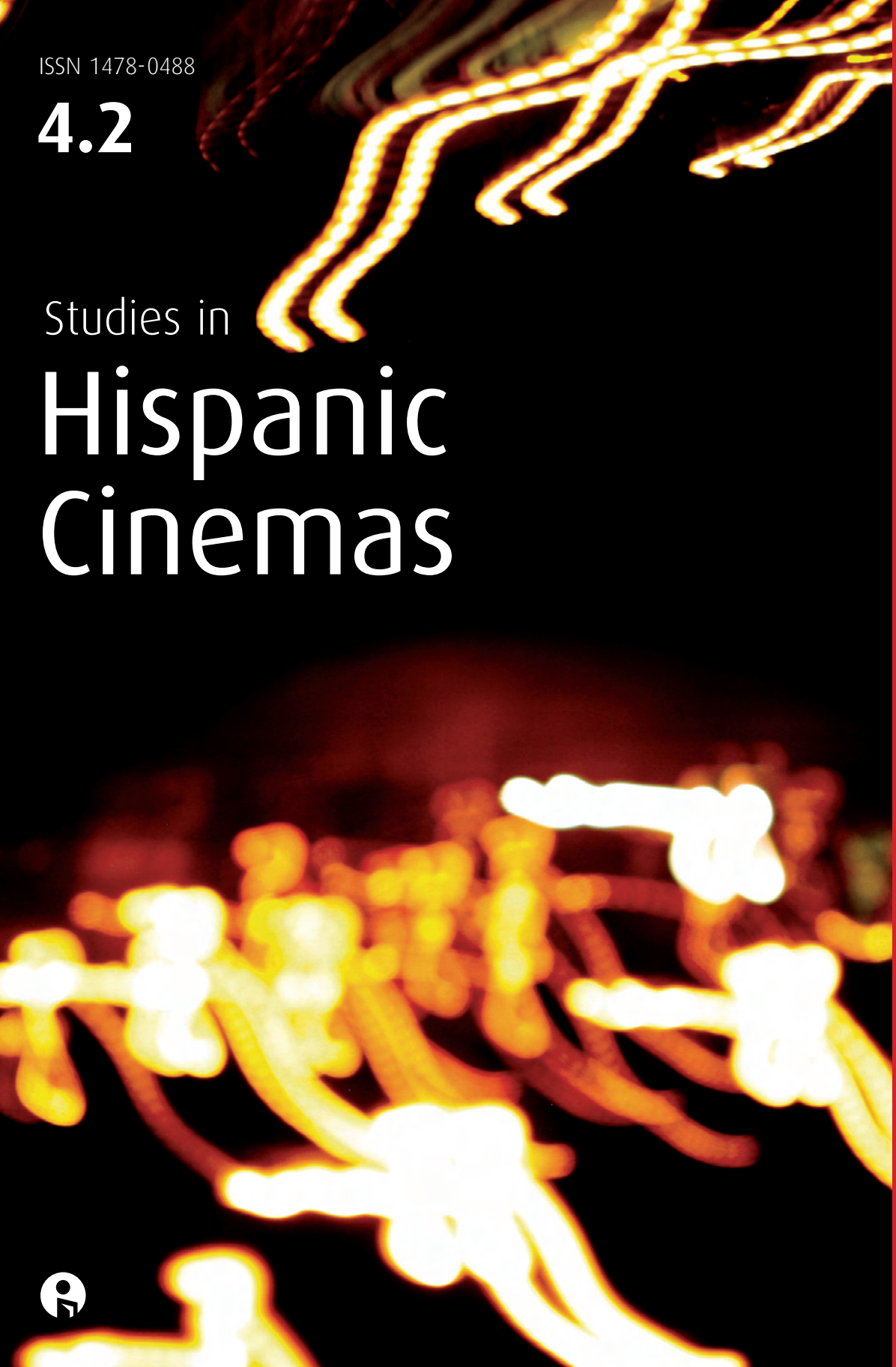
Studies in Hispanic Cinemas



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Studies in Hispanic Cinemas

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Studies in Hispanic Cinemas (SHC) is a new refereed, academic journal, written in English and aimed at scholars, teachers, students and devotees from all over the world whose focus is on Spanish-speaking cinemas. While seeking to attract students, teachers and scholars in Hispanic Studies and Hispanic Cultural Studies, the journal is also directed at colleagues working in contiguous fields (Latin American Studies, Modern Languages, European Cinemas, Postcolonial Studies, Media, Film and Communication Studies etc.), thereby stressing the importance of an inter-cultural and inter-disciplinary focus.

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Papers of up to 6000 words are invited on topics related to the above issues or on any aspect of Hispanic cinemas. Submissions in Spanish are welcome but if accepted we request that such texts also be submitted in English translation.

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Anon. 'Vanilla Sky', *The Observer*, 27 January 2002, p. 15.

Labanyi, J. (1997) 'Race, gender and disavowal in Spanish cinema of the early Franco period: the missionary film and the folkloric musical', *Screen*, 38: 3, pp. 215–31.

Villeneuve, J. (1977), *A aventura do cinema português* (trans. A. Saramago) Lisboa: Editorial Vega.

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Introduction

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Disintegrating pictures: Studies in early Spanish film

David George

Susan Larson

Leigh Mercer

The study of early Spanish film can be a melancholy enterprise. Most of the film stock from the silent period has disintegrated, and hundreds of original prints have been lost. Roman Gubern is of the opinion that only 10% of all Spanish films made before 1939 remain in viewable form in private collections or housed in national film archives (*Historia* 14). Reasons for the destruction of this part of Spain's cultural patrimony are many. In addition to the ravages of age and neglect, heightened by the rapid disintegration of early celluloid, fires in storage warehouses wiped out hundreds of films. Much of Spanish silent film scholarship, therefore, involves the reading of screenplays and accounts of film screenings in publications such as *Arte y Cinematografía*, *El Cine*, *Cinema Variedades*, *Fotogramas*, *Popular Film* and *La Pantalla* in an effort to piece together not just the plots and themes of the lost films but also audience reception. This type of work is facilitated by the good graces of a handful of generous employees of the Spanish Film Archives in Madrid, the Catalonian Film Archives in Barcelona and the Film Archives of Valencia. The rare release of a Spanish silent film will send Spanish film scholars scrambling for copies before their small runs are sold out, and the relatively few studies and copies of Spanish silent films are circulated among scholars like valuable artefacts. In short, studying Spanish film produced between 1896 and 1936 means engaging in a shadowy game of hide and seek with images whose traces grow dimmer with each passing day.

For Spanish film historian Susan Martin Márquez, 'one central assumption in much of the newest criticism on Spanish film . . . [is that] a pre-Franco cinema remains unimaginable as well as unseeable' (4). Film critic Pedro Jiménez seconds this idea, noting that 'primitive' Spanish film is not well studied, and as a result, undervalued (1). The authors of the following essays on early Spanish film contend that an incomplete understanding of early Spanish film translates into an incomplete understanding of Spain's modernity. Debates in Spain regarding the legitimacy of film as an art

form, debates engaged in by intellectuals and policy-makers who wanted to define the common spaces between cinema and modern urban society, were central to the way modernity was understood by many Spaniards. The arrival of the cinema is a result of the confluence of a privileged mode of specularity and its newest medium of recording available through the technology of the camera. The advent of film results in nothing less than the development of a significantly new social space in the form of the movie theatre, which offered new forms of activity and objects for perception, intensified forms of commodity exchange and fetishism, and most generally, signs of a change in the perception of temporal and spatial relations.

The first film clips seen in Spain were shown in Madrid in 1896 by Andrés Promio, the cameraman of the Lumière brothers. Barcelona, however, given its solid industrial base and that it was relatively closer to Paris, developed a film industry much earlier and much more advanced and productive than that of Madrid. By the second decade of the twentieth century, the initial attraction of film as spectacle had begun to wear off and commercial filmmakers found that they would need to develop other means to draw spectators to theatres if they were to continue to thrive. The narrative film, the film star and the movie house were born during this transitional period in an effort to control one of the main difficulties faced not only by silent cinema, but also by all forms of early mass culture: the unpredictable patterns of audience behaviour. Film producers, with an eye on profit and a deep-seated fear of the masses, looked to the popular theatre and pulp literature of the day for material that would insure a steady flow of cash and the maintenance of the political status quo. As a result, features that showcased familiar stories and recognisable stars from the repertoires of the music hall and the *zarzuela*, or religious themes, and the *españolada*, which promoted a popular and picturesque image of Spain as a land of quaint rural villages, *bandoleros* and bullfighters, would become the economic mainstays of Spanish film by the end of the 1910s. This stereotyping of a supposedly pre-modern Spain continued to be cultivated by Spanish directors throughout the 1920s and 30s with great commercial success. Gubern points out that the cultural values represented in the silent films produced during the Primo de Rivera dictatorship continued unchanged, for the most part, during the Second Republic.

> La burguesía inversora en este campo de la industria del ocio procedía de los sectores más retrógrados, culturalmente y económicamente alicortos y económicamente oportunistas, de tal modo que, si durante la República ciertos productos de la industria cultural – como el libro o el teatro – recibieron un serio impulso en su condición de medios culturales socialmente legitimados, el cine siguió ensayando confinado en el *ghetto* del espectáculo trivial de evasión y de alienación popular. (270)
>
> [The bourgeoisie investing in the leisure industry was of the most retrograde, culturally stunted, economically stingy and opportunistic sector of society, so much so that, if during the Second Republic certain products of the culture industry – like books and theater – received serious support as

socially legitimate forms of culture, film remained stuck in a ghetto of evasive, trivial spectacle and mass alienation.]

Although it is true that the early popular films that have been preserved or restored are the products of a struggling Spanish film industry, they also represent a rich repository of competing ideologies of modernity as they played out in the minds of a diverse set of Spain's citizens. For this reason, among many others, this body of works deserves closer attention.

Popular film always had a close connection with the avant-garde in Spain as a point of reference in the ever shifting terrain of modernity. One look at the avant-garde prose and poetry of early twentieth-century Spain makes this clear. Aleixandre's poem 'Cinemática' from *Ámbito* (1924), Alberti's homages to Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton in *Ya era un tonto y lo que he visto me ha hecho dos tontos* (1929) to Jarnés's story 'Charlot en Zalamea' (in *Escenas junto a la muerte*, 1931) to Ayala's 'Cazador en el alba' (1928) and Gómez de la Serna's *Cinelandia* (1923): it is obvious that film had an enormous impact on the narrative experiments going on in Spain. The pioneering Cineclub Español, housed in the now-restored Cine Doré on the Calle Santa Isabel in Madrid, would be the centre of some of the most heated debates on the crisis of representation brought on by the mass production of images for popular consumption by the nascent medium. Because of the great importance of Surrealism in Spain, Salvador Dalí wrote in the 1920s about the blurring distinction between what he called 'artistic' and 'antiartistic' film. 'Look out for the false aspect of Modernity! Modernity . . . . Modernity does not mean canvases painted by Sonia Delaunay, nor does it mean Fritz Lang's Metropolis. It means hockey pullovers of anonymous English manufacture; it means film comedies, also anonymously made, of the loony type' ('Poetry of the Mass-Produced Utility' translated in Finkelstein 58).

This distinction is made even more clear in the title of Dalí's most extensive treatment of film, 'Art Film, Antiartistic Film', an article dedicated to Luis Buñuel (*La Gaceta Literaria* 15 December 1927). Dismissing literature as an element alien to film, Dalí called for the suppression of 'anecdote' altogether, by which he meant that he did not appreciate psychological complexity in film, instead valuing the most primary and standard emotions and the monotony of everyday actions and signs, 'like the car chase or the villain's mustache' (Finkelstein 56).

In this essay Dalí once again contrasts 'antiartistic' and 'artistic' film thus:

> Antiarstistic cinema has created a wholly characteristic and very differentiated world of emotions and image types that are appropriate, completely defined and clear for the conceptions that are shared by the thousands of people who comprise the great cinema audiences. Moreover, this whole creation is organic and homogeneous, the product of anonymous contributions and perfection attained by the route of standardization. . . . Artistic cinema, on the other hand, has not managed to establish any universal type of emotion; quite the contrary, each new film tends toward the highest degree of rupture, to the most absolute dissociation, to the most uncontrolled inorganicism. (54–55)

Both Buñuel and Dalí argue passionately for an appreciation of the inherent poetry of modern, mass-produced objects. During the Second Republic, Buñuel would be the anonymous producer of four popular, so-called 'anti-artistic' or mass-produced films made in the Filmófono Studios: the zarzuela *Don Quintín el amargao* (1935), the españolada *La hija de Juan Simón* (1935), and the zarzuelas *¿Quién me quiere a mí?* (1936), and *¡Centinela alerta!* (1936). Curiously enough, José Luis Saenz de Heredia disclosed the anonymous nature of Buñuel's work in 1946, in an article in *Radiocinema* where he denies his role in the two Filmófono films credited to him on the grounds that he could never have made such bad films.

Engaging in early Spanish film scholarship means unearthing a series of these small surprises. In addition to archival research, another requirement is an openness to rethinking contemporary film genres in historical context. The filmic genre of trick films is likely the first attempt on the part of Spanish filmmakers to simultaneously embrace and question the effects of modernization on Iberian society. In her article, Leigh Mercer looks at three of the recently restored trick films made by the Aragonese director, writer and cinematographer Segundo de Chomón – *El hotel eléctrico* (1905) *Le scarabée d'or* (1907) and *Une excursion incohérente* (1909). Although these films have usually been viewed as humorous 'attraction films' – films belonging to a carnival atmosphere and devoid of narrative development and social substance – she argues that these films did more than merely jolt audiences with new visual spectacles. Specifically, she demonstrates how Chomón used technological advances in turn-of-the-century cinematography to create films that question the broader role of technology in modernising life. Dispelling the notion of 'primitive cinema' with which trick films have often been labelled, Mercer reveals how Chomón's films, through their giddy exploitation of special effects yet broader conceptual rejection of technology, stand as precursors to Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's Surrealist masterpiece, *Un chien andalou* (1928).

Susan Larson and Eva Woods have argued that in this period,

> the attraction to film came both from seeing the image itself and from the radically different type of viewing experience made possible by film technology. Cinema projected modernity, and was, for film's first spectators, an instance of modernity itself, thereby complicating, enriching or double-coding every instance of the visual in modern society. (9)

Nowhere is this double-coding more apparent than in Segundo de Chomón's films. The rapid-fire stop-motion photography effects in these films blatantly question modes of seeing at the same time that they demonstrate the dangers of re-visualising the world in such strange and modern ways. Keeping in mind the recent recognition of Chomón as the inventor of the travelling shot and the morphing technique, Mercer ultimately explores how the director's inventive visual spectacle of shocks, disruptions and transformations came to function as shorthand for the disjointed modernity of early twentieth-century Spain itself.

David George's essay on the image of the crowd in Blasco Ibañez's *Sangre y arena* (1916) takes up the question of spectatorship in the context of Spanish silent cinema by examining the writer's foray into the art of filmmaking as an attempt to harness the popular appeal of film as an instrument of democracy. Luis Enrique Ruiz Álvarez notes that with the premiere of *Sangre y arena* at the Teatro de la Zarzuela in May 1917 'abre un nuevo periodo literario que eleva el nivel artístico del cine' [opens a new literary period that elevates the artistic level of cinema] (185). With the adaptation of his 1908 novel, Blasco aligns Spanish film with the broader movement in European and American film inspired by Riciotto Canudo's 1911 manifesto *The Birth of the Seventh Art,* by the pioneering narrative techniques of Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1913), and Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), that sought to raise the cultural literacy of film spectators and define film's political function by reclaiming the new media as art, instead of merely entertainment. The historical genre films and literary adaptations of the 1910s indeed secured cinema's status as a narrative art, but not just for art's sake. By emphasising the quality of films, production companies like Blasco's Prometeo Films hoped to appeal to as well as to promote liberal middle-class values in order to control the impact of cinema on the individual and society. The cinematised version of *Sangre y arena* takes a critical look at the myths of fame and celebrity that sustained the bullfighter as a popular hero, and as a staple of *españolada* films, by revealing him to be a product of the degenerate desires of an unruly crowd of fans. George studies the way in which Blasco uses the visualisation of the crowd on-screen not merely to underscore his moralising message, but as a mechanism for forcing the potentially unruly crowd of spectators gathered in the cinema to confront and reject a negative image of itself.

If the study of Spanish silent film has a quixotic feel to it, as we stated at the beginning of this introduction, it is also a series of surprises and anomalies. One notoriously difficult to classify avant-garde Spanish filmmaker is Nemesio M. Sobrevila. In Spanish film histories, Sobrevila is a director whose work is always mentioned at least in passing. He's usually talked about as a creative genius, 'el maldito del cine español, uno de los pioneros del cine independiente entre nosotros,' [Spanish film's cursed one, one of the pioneers of our independent Spanish film] or 'un admirador ferviente del modo de hacer películas de alemanes y rusos' [an admirer of the German and Russian way of making films] (Gubern *Proyector* 174–176). In 1949 film historian Juan Antonio Cabero referred to Sobrevila's work as 'proyectos de avanzada y visiones de lo que la cinematografía había de ser, [lo que] hizo concebir en él al Mesías esperado del cine español' [projects in advance of what film was to become, that which made people think of him as the awaited Messiah of Spanish film] (263). Luis Buñuel, with whom Sobrevila briefly collaborated on the above-mentioned *La hija de Juan Simón,* admired him but simply called him a 'madman' (Aranda 72).

Susan Larson's article looks at the philosophical and aesthetic questions explored in Sobrevila's 1929 film *El sexto sentido* that are also central to the film criticism of Walter Benjamin. There are three closely interrelated

concepts which interested both men in their work: the representation of filmic space, the emergence of film as a crisis of representation, and the sociopolitical implications of the separation of the image from its referent through editing (what Benjamin called the 'cut'). This comparative essay tries to explain some aspects of Sobrevila's work that can be hard to access without being placed in a fuller social and critical context because the film is clearly a parody of the New Objectivist films of Vertov and Ruttman at the same time that it combines a highly avant-garde metacinematic mode within the plot of a traditional *costumbrista* tale. Paradoxically, this complex example of 'cine retaguardia', as the director himself called it, was released with much fanfare on DVD in 2003, but edited incorrectly. The new release presents the film's reels in incorrect order, condemning this essential piece of Spain's film history to even further marginalisation.

Recent developments in the fields of visual and media studies, new ways of looking at Spain's modernisation process and the collaboration of several generations of scholars are now beginning to piece together and theorise anew this largely 'unseeable' early period of Spain's film history. The articles that comprise this special section grew from a panel of the 'Memories of Modernity' Conference organised by the editors of *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas* and held in New York in the fall of 2006. The theoretical approaches, themes and concerns that underpin each of the authors work represent just a few of the myriad ways in which Spanish film from the silent era might be studied. All three of the participants are delighted to have the opportunity to expand on their work in these pages and look forward to future collaborations with the readers of this journal.

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Fear at the hands of technology: The proto-Surrealism of the films of Segundo de Chomón

Leigh Mercer *The University of Washington, USA*

Abstract

This essay explores the ways in which director Segundo de Chomón's films represent a crucial moment of proto-surrealist sensibility in the development of Spanish cinema. Specifically, I show how three of his experimental works – El hotel eléctrico, Le scarabée d'or, *and* Une excursion incohérente, *in their self-reflexive anxiety regarding modernity, through their cultivation of a nihilist order, and in their blurring of interior consciousness and the exterior world, defy the category of 'primitive cinema' with which they have often been labelled, and stand as a model of radical modernity in early European film. Furthermore, this essay suggests that these films form a previously unrecognised genetic map of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's* Un chien andalou, *through their development of a distinctive visual landscape, and more importantly, through their use of film tricks as a means to underscore the pervasive early-twentieth-century fear of unbridled technology.*

Keywords

trick film
silent film
Segundo de Chomón
modernity
surrealism

The idea that Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un chien andalou*/*An Andalusian Dog* (1928), with its presentation of the disintegration of the self and the collapse of human consciousness under the weight of the dream world, represents the origin and apex of Spanish Surrealist cinema is something of a commonplace among European film scholars. Indeed, for film theoretician Linda Williams, *Un chien andalou*, together with Buñuel's *L'age d'or*/*Age of Gold* (1930) represent 'the only "pure" examples of filmic Surrealism' in the history of the cinema (1981: xii). Highlighting the unique legacy of *Un chien andalou* to the history of Spanish film, Marvin d'Lugo has furthermore argued that this film 'crystallized the tradition, for future generations of [Peninsular] filmmakers, of an irreverent and mordant practice of filmmaking' (1997: 4).

But more than twenty years prior to Buñuel and Dalí's acclaimed cinematic premier in Paris, Aragonese trick photographer and filmmaker, Segundo de Chomón, was breaking boundaries and wowing audiences in Paris and beyond with his at turns dreamlike, dehumanising, and fear-inducing productions for Pathé Frères Studios. Long before Buñuel and Dalí challenged hegemonic modes of representation in film, Chomón was

transgressing the boundaries set up by the earliest filmmakers working in Spain in the Lumière style – men such as Fructuos Gelabert and Joan de Codina. Chomón, who had arrived in Paris in 1897 to study the Lumière brothers' technology, was a man of many firsts in the film industry. He was a founder of the first Spanish film production company, Macaya y Carro, a master cinematographer known for his special effects, and is credited with inventing the travelling shot as well as numerous film colouring techniques. This grand artist of trick cinematography, however, was a cutting-edge filmmaker on more than just the business or mechanical level. By eschewing the two common generic tendencies of early European film – the localist documentary and the melodramatic adaptation of nineteenth-century theatrical works – and developing a filmic language basted on notions of incoherence and flux, Chomón created a modern cinematic genre entirely unique in turn-of-the-century Spain and a film style that would later be readily embraced by Surrealist and other experimental directors.

Early film historian Tom Gunning has described the trick or magic film genre of directors such as George Méliès and Chomón as a genre that self-consciously broke the flow of narrative and transcended the laws of nature (1990: 90). This was a genre determined to bewilder, not educate, the film-going audience. Gunning applies the term 'cinema of attractions' to these early special effects marvels and regards these films as a starting point for future experimental works, noting that the cinema of attractions does not disappear with the subsequent dominance of narrative film, 'but rather goes underground, . . . into certain avant-garde practices' (1990: 57). Writing in 1918 of the fascination of later Surrealist filmmakers with their medium, an associate of Andre Bretón, Phillipe Soupault, likewise attributes their interest in film to its striking ability to upset the natural laws of space and time (1918: 4). Dali and Buñuel's *Un chien andalou*, certainly plays freely with issues of time, disrupting the idea of a chronological narrative with subtitles that announce leaps backwards and forwards in time of day, and even in season. But more importantly, through the technologies of stop action photography and morphing, this film disrupts spatial realism, erasing the mouth of the male protagonist and showing hair sprouting where there had once been lips, moving the ruffled clothes worn seconds prior by the male lead, and now laid upon the bed as if still worn by someone lying on the sheets, revealing female nudity where there had once been matronly dress, or blending images of female anatomy and sea creatures. The apparently incongruent succession of images and events in the film serves to question the idea of reality as anything other than the imaginative experience of interior consciousness projected on the exterior world. Thus, according to Inez Hedges, the effect of *Un chien andalou* is to give primacy to image over narrative progression, so that the spectator is held in fascination or tension by the visual spectacle (1983: 51–2). But despite these suggestive connections between the early trick film genre and Surrealism, few attempts have been made to root Surrealist cinema's technical insights and innovative themes in the early film production that preceded it.[1]

1 The Surrealist movement grew out of Dadaism and flourished in Europe in the 1920s. Surrealism can particularly be understood as an artistic reaction against the rationalist Western culture that had produced the horrors of World War I. While the special effects and radical themes of Surrealist film are most often read as sui generis, film historian Agustín Sánchez Vidal, in his monograph *El cine de Segundo de Chomón*, has described Chomón's cinema as 'un eslabón perdido hacia el surrealismo' (1992: 89).

Through an examination of three of Chomón's early special effects fantasies – *El hotel eléctrico/The Electric Hotel*, shot in Barcelona in 1905, his insect film *Le scarabée d'or/The Golden Beetle*, filmed in Paris in 1907, and the hallucinatory *Une excursion incohérente/An Incoherent Trip* of 1909, I want to explore the ways in which the Aragonese director's films represent a crucial moment of proto-Surrealist sensibility in the development of Franco-Ibreian cinema. Specifically, I will show how these films, in their self-reflexive anxiety regarding contemporary life, through their cultivation of a nihilist order, and in their blurring of interior consciousness and the exterior world, defy the category of 'primitive cinema' with which they have often been labelled, and stand as a model of radical modernity in early Spanish film. Furthermore, I aim to reveal how these films form a previously unrecognised genetic map of *Un chien andalou*, first through their development of a distinctive visual landscape, and more importantly, through their use of film tricks as a means to underscore both the fascination of technology and the terror of the unbridled machine in early-twentieth-century Europe. Like the cinematic production of Buñuel and Dalí, *El hotel eléctrico*, *Le scarabée d'or*, and *Une excursion incohérente* emphasise the numerous ways in which human life is invaded and re-shaped by technology. Chomón, a turn-of-the-century director who spent his formative artistic years in Barcelona during the height of the *Modernista* era, reflects in his work the paradoxical relationship to the machine age so prevalent within the art nouveau movement. As Lily Litvak has shown in *A Dream of Arcadia*, while these artists saw technology as a possible means to improve certain living standards, at the same time they vociferously rejected industrialism and all civilisation based on the machine (1975: 3).

Stephen Kern, in *The Culture of Time and Space,* framed the period of 1880–1918 as a revolutionary era in which 'a series of sweeping changes in technology and culture created distinctive new modes of thinking about and experiencing time and space' (1983: 1). Max Nordau too, in his 1895 essay *Degeneration*, posited that 'humanity can point to no century in which the inventions that penetrate so deeply, so tyrannically, into the life of every individual are crowded so thick as in ours' as he recognised his fear that 'steam and electricity ha[d] turned the customs of life of every member of the civilized nations upside down' (1895: 7). And in his study of early melodramatic cinema and the theories of modernity, Ben Singer has argued that the decades around the turn of the century might be termed 'modernity at full throttle', noting that because the technology of the cinema is born in this context, early film scholarship has turned increasingly to the question of film and its relation to the invention of modern life (2001: 19). Technological advances and the resultant anxiety they produced in the form of modernity and filmmaking thus appear inextricably bound at the outset of the twentieth century. The technology revolution associated with an increasingly complex urban environment led many writers and theoreticians, but particularly cineastes, to technically exploit and conceptually explore the sensorial shifts brought on by modernity.

From Incoherent directors such as Émile Cohl, to Futurists Arnaldo Ginna and A.G. Bragaglia, and the Surrealists Dalí and Buñuel, experimental filmmakers of the early-twentieth century all reflected the hyperstimulus of the modern era in the abruptness, ruptures and dynamism of the films they produced. Yet even before the various avant-garde movements made their assault of discontinuity on film, the cinema of attractions 'trace[d] out the visual topology of modernity: a visual environment which is fragmented and atomized; a gaze which . . . seems to be pushed and pulled in conflicting orientations, hurried and intensified, and therefore less coherent and anchored' (Gunning 1994: 194).

In Segundo de Chomón's *El hotel eléctrico*, stop-motion photography drives the story of married tourists who arrive at a revolutionary hotel where everything is done automatically: suitcases move by themselves into an elevator and up to a suite, clothes put themselves away in drawers, shoes shine themselves, and even postcards write home, all achieved with the press of a button on a control panel. But this jarring series of events, produced by seemingly playful technical manipulation, culminates in a serious attack on technology itself, in a scene in which a tipsy operator in the hotel basement begins pulling levers indiscriminately and the whole system goes haywire. Thus in *El hotel eléctrico*, not only does Chomón stress that technology can provide wonder and delight us with unexpected visions of human existence, but with the denouement of the film, the director also reveals the extent to which technology can be a source of horror, as he portrays the extraordinary promise of the hotel technology biting back, attacking the bourgeois guests that were previously only too happy to be served automatically, and threatening to destroy the livelihood of the owners. So too in *Un chien andalou* does technology assert itself in aggressive and even life-threatening ways: cars trample pedestrians, and where books once suggested growth and learning, the stop-motion substitution of guns in the male protagonist's hands leads him to kill his double, suggesting that more knowledge only brings a greater understanding of the violent nature of mankind. Even the film's final scene on the beach, which begins so gaily with two lovers strolling in the springtime, ends with its depiction of two half-buried cadavers, seemingly tortured by the garrote, as their necks are snapped in two. Here we must remember Haim Finkelstein's assertion that in Buñuel and Dalí's film, 'all of the images, even the most incongruous ones, embody a sense of violence and cruelty' (1987: 136). So too should we recall the Surrealists' overall rejection of technology, inasmuch as technology was tied to middle class ideas of materialistic progress and chained to a foundation of logic and reason.

The oneiric visual language of Chomón's films likewise stands as a precursor to Surrealism's iconographic landscape. I believe a few key comparisons will make this connection more readily apparent. Critical analyses of *Un chien andalou* frequently cite the scene depicting ants crawling in the protagonist's palm as one of the most novel and provocative shots in the film, attributing its inclusion at times to Buñuel's academic interest in

entomology or, in other interpretations, to Dalí's admitted fascination with ants as a symbol of desire and death, a fixation that dates from his early childhood. A close-up shot of a death's-head moth during the heated exchange between the male and female protagonists of the film has also garnered intense critical attention. However, what scholars have failed to recognise is the more obvious connection between the Surrealists' cultivation of insect imagery and the visual language already developed at the turn-of-the-century during the vogue in insect-themed films. In France, Méliès' 1899 film *Un bon lit*/A *Midnight Episode* was one of the first fantasy films to explore the macabre side of the insect world, depicting the gruesome nighttime encounter between a man and a beetle. Two years later, Méliès also produced *La Chrysalide et le papillon d'or*/*The Brahmin and the Butterfly*, a film that depicts Méliès himself dressed in a kaftan and turban and conjuring a giant caterpillar from an egg-shaped cocoon that then metamorphoses into a butterfly woman. Segundo de Chomón, hired by Pathé Studios in Paris to compete with the fantastical productions of Méliès, created *Le scarabée d'or*, a film that portrays an exotic man turning a golden beetle into a half-woman, half-butterfly, and the revenge that this creature takes on her creator. Pascual Cebollada, in his essay '100 years of cinema in Spain - a historical profile', has noted that Chomón's films were among the most widely screened in the 26 cinemas known to be open in Madrid in 1907, and we can assume this to be the case in the other cinematic centres of Spain: Barcelona and Bilbao (2007). There is little doubt that Buñuel and Dalí, who organised the first *cine-club* [cinema club] in Madrid during their university days in the early 1920s, would have been familiar with the works of Chomón, a director who continued to premiere films until 1927. Chomón would even remain a point of reference for the few avant-garde directors of the 1940s, chief among them Catalan filmmaker Llobet Gràcia. Marsha Kinder has highlighted the significance of the birth of the filmmaking protagonist in Gràcia's *Vida en sombras*/*Life in Shadows* (1947–48), occurring as it does in a cinema during the screening of films by Lumières, Méliès, and Segundo de Chomón (1993: 403). *Vida en sombras* owes much of its cinematic reflexivity to the earlier attempts by Chomón to make films about the ideological potential of the medium, and the role of the cinema spectator.

Le scarabée d'or, in addition to cultivating cinematic images similar to those in *Un chien andalou*, anticipates Buñuel and Dalí's film in two key ways. Like the Surrealist masterpiece, *Le scarabée d'or* presents a figurative relationship between the insect world and carnal desire, and ultimately even death. Beetles, from the time of the ancient Egyptians, have been seen as symbols of rebirth and immortality and have often been associated with ideas of masculine power. Chomón's film clearly represents a twist on those traditional interpretations. In this classic trick film, a sorcerer spies a golden beetle and places it in a fire, whereupon it becomes a winged woman with special powers. The sorcerer's attempt to capture and control the beetle, indeed his fondling of this fetish object, backfires when his passion

to possess the creature, now transformed, incites her aggression. She conjures up an agitated display of fire and water, which leaves the elderly man writhing on the floor. Two handmaidens appear at the service of the butterfly-woman and follow her commands to hurl the sorcerer into the same fire that that had once threatened her. The film ends with the man's death, as the butterfly woman hovers above him, smiling. These menacing and illogical connections between male desire, insects, violence and decomposition, of course, formed the foundation of *Un chien andalou* from the moment Buñuel and Dalí conceived of the film. As both directors stated on numerous occasions, a dream of Dalí's of a hand crawling with ants[2] was one of two initial inspirational images around which the film was to revolve. Appearing as this scene does framed by a shot of opening flowers, followed by that of a severed hand being prodded by an androgynous character, *Un chien andalou*'s exploration of the insect world suggests both devouring desire, amorphous sexuality, and the death of the flesh.

Secondly, just as in *El hotel eléctrico*, *Le scarabée d'or* evokes the threat inherent in the world of technology, albeit more subtly, through the use of special effects and their connection to a narrative of a creation that conquers and devours its creator. Although machines per se are not the focus of Chomón's insect film, as they are in *El hotel eléctrico*, the Aragonese director still continues to use the cinematographic technology of stop-motion to incite fear and foreshadow human annihilation at the hands of unfathomable man-made creations. He accomplishes this by pairing the theme of man's fear of technology with that of man's fear of woman. Woman, of course, is the ultimate creator, far superior to the technological man, who can only produce lifeless goods. And so the male protagonist's attempt to mould a female, indeed to forge her from metal and fire suggests the hubris of mankind, in its attempt to mechanise even motherly creation. As seen in *Le scarabée d'or*, man's blind faith in his ability to fashion and control his creations proves to be his greatest downfall, as only violence and annihilation can result from an all-encompassing 'technologization' of the environment.

One of the earliest avant-garde movements in Europe was the Incoherent movement, today largely forgotten by historians of this intense era of development in the plastic arts and film. The group, founded by Jules Lévy in 1880s Paris, sought to create incoherent art to counteract the pervasiveness of the so-called decorative arts. Incoherence could be achieved, these artists argued, by injecting art with absurdity, nightmares, and a childlike world vision. The Incoherents became wildly popular among Parisian bohemians, and were soon sponsoring large-scale exhibitions of drawings by people purposefully selected because they did not know how to draw. Émile Cohl, a caricaturist and political cartoonist, was one of the more interesting figures to come out of this movement. Although he did not become a filmmaker until the ripe age of 50, Cohl is especially known for creating *Fantasmagorie*/*A Fantasy*, a 1908 film considered the first fully animated cinematic production, and a pioneering work in its use of a stream of consciousness style.

2 In French, 'ants in the palm' is a colloquial expression that signifies that someone is itching for violence, or itching to kill.

By titling his 1909 film *Une excursion incohérente*, Segundo de Chomón clearly signalled to audiences of his time that this work was dabbling with the precepts of the Incoherent movement, recently resurrected by Emile Cohl's foray into the cinematic world. The absurd play, nightmarish situations and non sequitur narrative that form the basis of *Une excursion incohérente* are all anticipated in the film's title. But while the film's declaration of its incoherence is perhaps what most recognisably codes it as an experimental work aimed at challenging commonly held perceptions of reality, the film's title denotes another curious and just as powerful signifier, that of travel. The imaginary of travel was linked to film from its very origins, with one of the first films screened by the Lumière brothers in Paris depicting that most modern form of transportation – travel by train. This film, *L'arivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat/The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* (1896), which was reputed to frighten audiences who believed the onrushing train depicted in it was in reality heading towards them, associated the concept of travel with the idea of the modern machine's unstoppable power and potential threat to human existence.[3] By the time Chomón arrived in Paris to take up a position at Pathé Studios in 1905, travel films had become all the more vogue in the city of lights. The most extreme example of this trend would soon be French-Jewish financier Albert Kahn's *Archives de la Planète* [*The Planet Archives*]. This project, founded in 1908, had the stated goal of creating a visual inventory of the globe, and eventually amassed more than 183,000 meters of film, shot in over 48 countries (Amad 2001: 139–40).

By announcing to his public that this film would take them on an incoherent trip, Chomón clearly intended to undermine conventional concepts of travel set up by the early-twentieth-century documentary tradition, which purported to be able to capture reality for the easy consumption and conquest of the viewing public. The Aragonese director, of course, had already begun to challenge the prevailing optimistic view of travel in his earlier film, *El hotel eléctrico*. On the one hand, this stop-motion masterpiece stressed that travel can provide wonder, and delight us with unimaginable manifestations of human ingenuity. But with the conclusion of the film in which the hotel's mechanical service system malfunctions, the director also revealed the extent to which the strange and new can be a source of horror, as he portrayed the hotel technology attacking the smug bourgeois travellers, previously all too content to be waited upon in increasingly unnecessary and absurd ways.

The dark side of modern travel is likewise exposed in *Une excursion incohérente*, when a bourgeois city-dwelling couple set out on a trip to the country. Their sumptuous picnic in a forest along the way turns into grotesque fare – sausage becomes a swarm of flies; eggs are cracked open to reveal mice, and a cake transforms into a writhing plate of worms. When they finally arrive at their country estate, rest is impossible, as the husband is accosted by a myriad of dreams involving the manipulation and transformation of his wife's body. In the end, even the romantic

3 The birth of Futurism roughly coincided with both the height of the travel film and trick film genres. According to Robert Short, Futurism 'was perhaps the earliest modern art movement to transpose its ideas to the medium of cinema' (2003: 18). Futurist leader Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's 'Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism', published in *Figaro* in Paris in 1909, marked a growing cult of the locomotive among the artistic avant-gardes. For the Futurists, the train represented unbridled speed and male sexual power, concepts both glorious and dangerous in their potential.

wishing well in the estate's courtyard becomes a threat, eating the couple and their two servants, one by one, and spitting them back out. Travel literally becomes a nightmare in *Une excursion incohérente*, as the stereotypical weekend escape from the city for rest and relaxation proves to consist of nothing more than bodily punishment, and nature conspires to dominate man as he foolishly attempts to control and 'collect' new environments.

Une excursion incohérente, I believe, more than any of Chomón's other films, reveals a crucial proto-Surrealist sensibility in early Franco-Iberian cinema. This film – through its use of tricks as a means to underscore the anxiety of modernisation in early-twentieth-century Europe, and through its development of a distinctive visual landscape based on disruption, disjuncture and transformation – forms a previously unrecognised template for *Un chien andalou*. Like the cinematic production of Buñuel and Dalí, Chomón's 1909 film emphasises the numerous ways in which human life is invaded and re-shaped by technology. This critique of technology is particularly apparent in *Une excursion incohérente* in the scene in which the vacationing married couple, sleeping in two beds with a sheet curtain strung between them, attempt to get a restful night's sleep after the grotesque failure of their picnic. One of the first film sequences ever to use 'sombras chinescas' or silhouettes, this scene foregrounds the figure of the husband, tossing and turning with bad dreams in his bed, as behind him his internal horrors literally take shape on the fabric that separates him from his wife. The ensuing animated shots all play with the basic values of the human subconscious – aggression and desire, and they do so by correlating these values, in part, with the corrupting forces of the modern technological world. In order, the wife's body is first transformed into a railroad, then a birdcage, a pastoral home, and finally a devil's playground. Just as in *Un chien andalou*, these sequences from *Une excursion incohérente* all manipulate cutting edge film technology for the purpose of subverting conventional ways of seeing the world and human existence. For Agustín Sánchez Vidal, clearly 'los fantasmas de ese matrimonio desencadenan un proceso que inaugura una nueva visualidad' [the ghosts of that marriage unleash a process that opens a new visuality] (1992: 89). Chomón employs the bed sheet as a reflection of the cinema screen, thus suggesting that this new visuality has at its core the boundless possibilities offered by the filmic experience. Film, Chomón implies, has the power to bring dreams and even nightmares to life, and in the process alter our understanding of reality. *Une excursion incohérente*'s association of film and the dream world is a clear precursor of what would become the Surrealist conception of art. As Michael Richardson has argued, because cinema 'lies on the edge of realities . . . and not simply because its flickering images are experienced in a dark room, . . . the surrealists were able to equate the experience of the cinema with that of the dream' (2006: 9).

A gripping anxiety with regards to the female body – a topic that will later be readily taken up by the Surrealists – appears to be at the heart of this scene's incongruent visual language. With the shot of a train emerging

from the wife's mouth and her body becoming a turn-of-the-century iron bridge, and that of her facial structure giving rise to the frame of a birdcage, Chomón blurs the boundary between the female form and the processes of industrialisation, and suggests a violation of humanity by an aggressive invasion of modern life. Even the husband's dream of a romantic interlude between a couple in their pastoral home – the only somewhat serene image in this sequence – features the couple's heads severing from their bodies to consummate a kiss. Indeed, additional violence is done to the body here with the suggestion that desire is only possible through the suppression of the corporeal. Furthermore, this sentimental scene is ultimately overrun by the husband's nightmare of demons attacking his sleeping wife's body. Violence and sexuality go hand in hand in *Une excursion incohérente*, as the film's melding of locomotives and bodily penetration, and its portrayal of sentimentality defeated by demonic possession evoke erotic fixation, bodily mutilation and the anxiety of female inaccessibility.

While Chomón's film may represent an emergent instance of the blurring of interior consciousness and the exterior world, *Un chien andalou* is certainly a pinnacle moment in the exploration of the dream world's presence in reality. As in *Une excursion incohérente*, man's fear of female sexuality is one of the prominent subconscious values manifested in *Un chien andalou*. In one of the most studied sequences of Buñuel and Dalí's film, the protagonist begins a decided sexual attack on the woman in the room. Through stop-motion photography and morphing techniques, the woman's matronly dress dissolves to reveal exposed breasts, her breasts transform into buttocks, and, despite the male protagonist's foaming at the mouth, the woman is immediately and permanently re-clothed. For Román Gubern, this scene represents male sexual desire as an agony that ends in unfulfillment (1999: 409). This sexual dissatisfaction is again re-enacted in the final scene between the couple, in which the woman's armpit hair, showing a strong likeness to her pubic region, replaces the male protagonist's mouth. This symbolic displacement suggests not only the spectre of mutilation, but also the anguish of female impenetrability, confirmed by the woman's definitive decision here to abandon the protagonist.

As we saw earlier, according to Inez Hedges, *Un chien andalou* stresses imagery over narrative advancement, so that the spectator is held in limbo by the visual spectacle (1983: 51–2). For Tom Gunning, 'the harnessing of visibility, this act of showing and exhibition' is the very essence of early trick films, and 'its inspiration for the avant-garde of the early decades of this century needs to be re-explored' (1990: 56). But although special effects historians such as John Brosnan have studied the remarkable resurgence of the works of Georges Méliès in the 1920s, and how 'he became the pet of the [French] Surrealists' (1974: 19), little to no attention has been paid to the impact of Segundo de Chomón's visual language on Buñuel and Dalí as Surrealist film writers and directors.

Gunning has labelled the trick film genre a cinema of discontinuity – an art that stood in stark contrast to the direction of film production as a

historical whole (1990: 90). As dominant as this genre was at the turn-of-the-century, it would become an artistic dead end, as narrative, not visual spectacle, ultimately came to dominate subsequent mainstream cinema. Like a series of magic tricks, the action of Chomón's *Une excursion incohérente* itself is built upon a series of discontinuities – shocks, disjunctures and stunning transformations. Instead of contributing to a cohesive and flowing narrative structure, the film's tricks seem to slow the picture down, drawing attention to themselves, and repeatedly announcing the power of cinema as a medium capable of focusing attention on the act of seeing. The scene in which the two servants set up the country estate's kitchen upon the vacationing couple's arrival is illustrative of the emphasis Chomón's film places on cultivating a jarring visuality. Not only does the film here digress into a long series of close-up shots of kitchen implements morphing into grimacing human forms, but the servants also themselves act out the implied reaction of the film's audience, standing by in disoriented awe as the kitchen's hearth fire changes first into a ring of dancing fairies and then a pair of threatening ghouls. Just as the servants stare in wonderment at the alchemy of the hearth fire, early spectators of *Une excursion incohérente* must have perceived this trick film as a dazzling visual spectacle, capable of delighting as much as horrifying.

Still shocking to viewers to this day, *Un chien andalou*'s opening sequence, in which a man slices a young woman's eye with a razor blade, has been read by critics as a call to a new way of seeing. As Gwynne Edwards has suggested, this scene 'assaults the viewer's sensibilities, shocking him or her, in true Surrealist fashion, out of complacency, and issuing a warning that this is not to be a conventional film' (2004: 81). Yet before Surrealist films such as this one, the animated or trick film genre defined itself entirely as a form set upon disrupting the illusion of realism and coherent narrative form. And like Surrealist films, trick films blatantly manipulated film technology for the purpose of subverting their audience's conventional ways of seeing the world and judging human existence.

Situating *Un chien andalou* in relationship with early Spanish trick films should not be thought to diminish the revolutionary quality of Buñuel and Dalí's creation, but it can open new avenues to understanding the charged images and themes of this highly studied masterpiece. Buñuel and Dalí were obviously not attempting to create another trick film in the traditional sense, but rather to manipulate the stylising and motifs of this early genre in order to rearticulate the nature of fantasy, now in decidedly psychological terms, in a way that would be more organised and accessible for their contemporary audience. Comparing *Un chien andalou* to Chomón's films cannot help but erase the commonly held notion that Franco-Iberian film production in the first twenty years of its existence was rudimentary or 'pre-modern'. Many of the techniques and themes exhibited in trick films were radical at the time of their initial deployment, and presaged the growing interest in special effects and the dream world that would come to predominate the avant-garde films of the 1920s. Furthermore, the continuity between Chomón's films and *Un chien andalou* highlights the lengthy evolution of the theme of fear of

modernisation in Spanish cinema, and forces us to question the longstanding critical belief that the 1920s marked the true advent of aesthetically complex filmmaking in Europe.[4] Ultimately, *El hotel eléctrico*, *Le scarabée d'or* and *Une excursion incohérente* demonstrate that trick film directors, much like later experimental filmmakers such as Buñuel and Dalí, viewed filmmaking as a means to express an enthusiasm for the filmic medium and its possibilities, and to rescue it from its servitude to narrative and theatrical forms, as they sought to construct cinema as a primarily visual and artistic instrument.

4 See, for example, Joseph Garncarz's discussion of German Expressionist filmmaking in 'Art and Industry: German Cinema of the 1920s' in *The Silent Cinema Reader*, Lee Grieveson and Peter Krämer, editors.

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Cinematising the crowd: V. Blasco Ibañez's Silent *Sangre y arena* (1916)

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Abstract

In present essay I examine the image of the crowd in Vicente Blasco Ibañez's 1916 film adaptation of his novel Sangre y arena *(1908) and how the writer's foray into the art of filmmaking constitutes an attempt to harness the popular appeal of film as an instrument of democracy. I explore the cinematisation of the novel's critique of the myths of fame and celebrity that sustained the bullfighter as a popular hero, and how film and novel eventually reveal him to be a product of the degenerate desires of a crowd of fans. I offer a detailed analysis of how Blasco uses the visualisation of the crowd on-screen to make the case that he does so not only to underscore his moralising message, but also as a mechanism to force the potentially unruly crowd of spectators, gathered in the cinema, to confront and reject a negative image of itself.*

Keywords

crowd theory
silent film
literary adaptation
celebrity
bullfighting

In Vicente Blasco Ibañez's 1908 novel *Sangre y arena*/*Blood and Sand* (Blasco Ibañez/André, 1916) the crowd of spectators responsible for the rise and fall of the bullfighter protagonist Juan Gallardo is figured as a beast that consumes individual will and threatens the rational functioning of democratic society. Through Gallardo's story, the author deconstructs the institutions of fame upon which such mass spectacles are dependent, and exposes the processes by which modern forms of entertainment produce their audiences as a system of brutalisation. The novel's criticism of the bullfight echoes ideas widely debated and theorised at the turn-of-the-twentieth century regarding the emergence of urban crowds and the ways in which these unpredictable political and social forces might be either harnessed or repressed.

If Blasco Ibañez's talent as a writer remains a topic of certain debate among scholars of Spanish literature, his status as a pioneer filmmaker is indisputable. His enthusiasm for the cinema is well documented, as is his direct involvement in the Spanish, French and American film industries and the way these activities influenced his narrative style during the last two decades of his life.[1] While many of his contemporaries were intrigued to experiment with film's artistic and representative possibilities, Blasco was one of the first in Spain to see its vast potential as a democratising force, capable of levelling up the cultural literacy of the average citizen. At the same time, he also recognised the inherent danger that a narrative

1 For an overview documenting various aspects of the author and the cinema see R. Ventura Meliá (1998).

form based on the collective experience of moving images posed for the preservation of individual autonomy as a producer of crowds. It is not by chance, then, that he chose to initiate his career as a filmmaker with an adaptation of *Sangre y arena* in 1916. Taking the 1908 text and its examination of the effects of celebrity and mass spectacles on the individual as my point of departure, the present essay studies how the film visualises on-screen crowds as a means of organising the masses off-screen by interpellating the live audience as a collective spectator. I argue that through the visualisation of the processes of crowd formation, and the way in which these images drive the film's plot, Blasco seeks to harness the potential of the cinema as part of his Republican political program to modernise Spanish society by empowering the individual.

P. D. Marshall observes 'The celebrity's power is derived from the collective configuration of its meaning; in other words, the audience is central in sustaining the power of any celebrity sign' (Marshall 1997: 65). Although certainly not among Blasco's best novels, *Sangre y arena* is arguably his most well known work thanks in large part to the Hollywood film adaptations of 1922 and 1941 that tied the story of Juan Gallardo to the celebrity texts of Rudolph Valentino, Tyrone Power and Rita Hayworth. The rags to riches plotline tracing the rise of a bullfighter from fatherless street urchin to the pinnacle of fame and fortune, has all of the essential elements of the popular *españolada* novel that supplied the early Spanish film industry with an uninterrupted stream of stories aimed at satiating audiences' desire for new stars and new star texts.[2] Indeed, on the surface the novel fits neatly into the mould of this type of literature that marketed tales of bandits, bullfighters and gypsy singers, usually set in Andalusia, to readers as figures encapsulating the essence of Spain. Yet, Blasco only takes advantage of the melodramatic appeal of this plotline as a vehicle to launch a scathing critique of stardom and of the role mass audiences play in the creation of popular heroes. He questions these institutions on moral and political grounds, and seeks to undo their predominance in Spanish culture as the primary representations of national identity.[3]

Throughout *Sangre y arena* there is an insistent social commentary articulated through the voices of Gallardo's *bandillero* Sebastián and the omniscient narrator. Sebastián, who has been at the bullfighter's side throughout his career, functions much like Catalinón in Tirso's *El burlador de Sevilla* in the way in which he goes along with but is always weary of the ultimate consequences of Gallardo's follies in and out of the bullring. In these observations, the crowd – the random and omnipresent groups of admirers who buzz around Gallardo – figures large in the novel from the very outset as the dynamic force responsible for both the production and destruction of the individual as celebrity. The process of constitution and destruction of the star is explored in the novel as an internal psychological process in which the reader witnesses how the mass of fans not only constructs the public image of the hero, but more disturbingly for society, also determines the individual's image of the self: '¡Qué gozo poder correr sus

2 As Eva Woods and others have studied the *españolada*, whose origins lie in foreign representations of Spain in the nineteenth century, would become the dominate genre of Spanish film through the 1950s. See E. Woods (2004), 'From Rags to Riches: The Ideology of Stardom in Folkloric Musical Comedy Film of the late 1930s and 40' in Antonio Lázaro Reboll and Andrew Willis (eds.), *Spanish Popular Cinemas,* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2pp. 40–59.

3 The antitaurine attitude was shared by the writers of the Generation of 1898, and was most notably treated in the essays and fiction of Eugenio Noel.

gallardías y atrevimientos a una docena de miles de espectadores: en su arte sólo era verdad lo que proporciona entusiasmos de muchedumbre y dinero a granel. Lo demás, familia y amoríos, sólo servía para complicar la existencia y dar disgustos' (What a pleasure to be able to show off his bravery and daring in front of several thousand spectators! In his profession, the only thing that mattered was that which enthralled the crowd and brought tons of money. Everything else, family and amorous adventures, only brought complications and unhappiness. Blasco Ibañez 1998: 215). The crowd exercises its influence on both the star and on the anonymous individuals that come together as a mass to witness the spectacles of fame, as a conscious-erasing entity that swallows up autonomy and freewill.

At the heart of Blasco's diatribe against the Spanish national sport is a preoccupation with education. He identifies the bullfight with the brutalisation and manipulation of the masses, and marks it as a tool used by conservative forces in society to maintain their grip on power. In doing so, he purposely also begins to define the essential mechanisms that had caused crowds to emerge as a key political actor by the advent of the twentieth century. Sebastián contemplates the ethical implications of his and Gallardo's work in the bullring by alluding to the bases of their fame and its political consequences: 'La gente necesita como el pan *sabé leé* y *escribí*, y no está bien que se gaste *er* dinero en nosotros mientras *farta* tanta escuela' (People need to learn to read and write like they need bread. It's not right for them to spend money on us when so much schooling is needed. Blasco Ibañez 1978: 160). The conflict between offering entertainment to the masses versus education is a fundamental moral issue that Blasco sought to address through the various phases of his literary and political careers. Here, the issue is drawn out for readers through the direct quote that reproduces the elision of the final 'R' and the exchange of the 'L' before a consonant for an 'R' as stereotypical markers of both the Andalusian dialect and a more general lack of education.[4] Rendering the speech of the bullfighter and his *bandolero* in this fashion throughout the novel serves to highlight their lower-class origin in the crowd, and reveals, at least in Sebastián's case, an awareness that the very spectacle upon which their livelihood is based, relies on the constant reproduction of an undereducated class that is manipulated and oppressed by the false promises of fame and the vanity of the very celebrities it worships.

The revelation that celebrity is the product of luck, dependent on the whim of a fickle crowd, progressively works to distance reader and from the hero as the novel explores the crowd/celebrity relationship. In doing so, the novelist marks the crowd as a negative force in society and disrupts the potential for identification between the reader and the crowd. Gallardo's excessive vanity is presented from the very beginning of the story through mention of his obsessive use of expensive English and French perfumes, and the way he playfully enjoys catching glimpses of himself in the mirrors of his dressing room and in public spaces: 'Sus ojos paseábase satisfechos sobre su persona, admirando el terno de corte elegante . . .' (His eyes

4 This occurs throughout the novel and is used to contrast the characters in terms of class, Doña Sol speech is not represented in this fashion.

glanced over his own figure with satisfaction as he admired his elegantly cut suit. Blasco Ibañez 1998: 9). French crowd theorist Gabriel Tarbe conceptualised modern society at the end of the nineteenth century as fluctuating between two dominant forces: the family and the crowd. A family-dominated society is one based on tradition, patriarchal order and the veneration of the past, whereas the crowd-based society is characterised by spontaneity and change driven by a feminine predilection for fashion (Marshall 1997: 33). The attainment of star status, and the resulting narcissism, feminise Gallardo, and signal his dependence on the mob. The main plot of the novel centres on the contradictory and therefore psychologically damaging drive to reaffirm his masculinity in the bullring by playing to the feminising desires of his fans. Throughout the novel, Gallardo oscillates between the love of his legitimate wife Carmen and the stable masculine ground of the conjugal family, and the illicit passions of the cosmopolitan and feminised world of luxury and uninhibited sexual passion offered by Doña Sol, the wealthy socialite who becomes his most avid, yet fickle, fan.

The nature of the crowd is explored through an almost scientific study of its by-product, the star. The figure of the bullfighter is used to examine the ways in which crowds emerge in the midst of mass spectacles that rely on the constant production of new stars and new star texts. The novel ends with the death of Gallardo in the bullring. The crowd of fans that elevated him to star status now disdains him for his exploits with Doña Sol and the rumour that financial and sexual excesses have drained his masculinity. In spite of the matador's death, the spectacle continues as if nothing has happened. Sebastián is deeply disturbed, causing him to view both the bullfighter and the bull as victims of a larger and more insatiable beast. Hearing the roar of the crowd, the narrator remarks: 'Rugía la fiera: la verdadera, la única" (The beast roared: the only one, the true one. Blasco Ibañez 1998: 409)'.

Blasco's notoriety as a writer is inextricably linked to his career as a politician, and as a result, his conceptualisations of the novel, and later of film, are inseparable from his Republican ideology. The explicitly political manner in which he practiced the literary profession, and secured his position as a public intellectual, won him the disdain of the writers of the Generations of '98 and '14, who, as Andrés Trapiello points out, 'Juzgaron que se metía en la literatura por la puerta falsa de la política, y ese malentendido, cuando se va seguido del éxito...es difícil de perdonar' (They judged that he had become a writer by ways of the false door of politics, and this misunderstanding, coupled with success, is difficult to pardon. Trapiello 1997: 159). He began to write novels in the 1890s with a sense of political purpose, driven by a commitment to raising the cultural literacy of the masses. León Roca writes: "En Blasco Ibañez va existir, durant molt de temps, el desig de difondre entre els seus seguidors politics una inquietud per la cultura i la educació; desig que s'aguidtzà en l'època en què els seus enemics l'anomenaren 'el tribù de la plebs"' (Blasco Ibañez long desired to

disseminate among his followers a curiosity for culture and education; a desire that became especially accentuated during the time when his enemies referred to him as 'the chief of the rabble' León Roca 1970: 14). With this end in mind, the writer enthusiastically experimented with and promoted all forms of industrialised mass media, as mechanisms essential for the democratic socialisation of Spain that would effect, once and for all, lasting political change. In spite of the negative image that his detractors promoted of him as a profit seeking opportunist, through the various endeavours that he would undertake between 1890 and 1914, Blasco never swayed from his commitment to social causes that affected the middle and working classes, and even though he became very wealthy, 'El fin no fue el dinero, sino la política' (Politics and not money was the motivation. Laguna Platero 1999: 123).

In the face of accusations of manipulating the masses, and instigating his followers to commit uncontrollable acts of rebellion with fiery public speeches and on the pages of his newspaper *El Pueblo*, Blasco gleefully classified himself as a propagandist and as 'un modelo sembrador de rebeldías contra lo existente' (a model sower of rebellion against the establishment. León Roca 1998: 105). He saw his political engagement of the masses as vastly different, and consequently nobler, than the rabblerousing caciques whose power depended on the ignorance and abject poverty of voters, because he pursued his program through education and culture. In this regard, Blasco's politics are classically Republican, and indeed Jacobean, in terms of its basic ideals. Nevertheless, there is also something undeniably modern in his approach to enlightening the masses through the creation of newspapers and the publication of novels in formats and at prices that made them highly accessible. Though short lived, his newspaper *El Pueblo* and ambitious editorial projects like *La Novela Ilustrada*, which sought to bring the classics of world literature to the masses, were enormous successes. Paradoxically, the price of the success of these endeavours also worked against their profitability: because of the high illiteracy rate among his followers, and the difficult conditions in which many lived, these materials were very often shared among his sympathisers and read aloud, which translated into fewer overall sales.

Gascó Conell describes how the novelist's supporters 'se reunían en grupo en la playa, en talleres, en tabernas, en los casinos para escuchar extasiados la lectura de los artículos de las novelas del maestro' (gathered on the beach, in workshops, taverns and casinos to listen to their leader's articles and novels being read. Corbalán 1998: 44). Industrialised mass media's power to gather together groups of anonymous individuals did not go unnoticed by Blasco; throughout his career he would revel in his own capacity to bring together large crowds and constantly seek new ways to broaden the reach of his political program beyond the scale of the crowd that could be physically gathered in a public place. At the same time, Blasco recognised that the use of ever more sophisticated means to reach his audience also contributed to the implicit problem of mass-based

politics: once formed, the crowd must be controlled in order for it to have a positive effect in the political and social realm. Indeed, the cinema and other early forms of mass communication and spectacle can be better understood by taking account of their dual role as a means to create and control crowds. As a Republican, Blasco was fully aware of the bourgeois public sphere's inner workings, based on virtual rather than real spaces of contact among private individuals with shared interests, as well as of the historical processes that had progressively expanded its dominance over the course of the nineteenth century. For him, the key to controlling the crowd seemed to lie in maintaining the imaginary line that separates the individual from the crowd based on notions of the division of space between realms of the public and the private that are part and parcel of the public sphere. Thus, a basic tension emerges between protecting the integrity of individual freewill and recognising public responsibility to the mass of anonymous individuals that purportedly share a common interest. As already explained in the context of *Sangre y arena*, the moment when the separation between private and public collapses, or one comes to dominate over the other, is the point at which the individual succumbs to the crowd.

Gustave Le Bon attributes images, and visual stimuli in general, a significant role in the process of crowd formation: 'Crowds being only capable of thinking in images are only to be impressed by images' (Le Bon 2002: 35).[5] Blasco seems to have this in mind when he defines the cinema by downplaying its debt to the theatre and underscoring its visual qualities: 'La cinematografía no es el teatro mudo, como creen muchos; es una novela expresada por medio de imágenes y frases cortas (The cinema is not silent theater, as many believe. It is a novel told via images and short phrases. Blasco Ibáñez 1922: 9)'. Even though theatre involves a visual re-enactment of events on stage, its mimetic affect is ultimately based on the dramatic text and is always limited by the artifice of the performance and the *mise en scene*. By contrast, the representative force of film, and its ability to reach a broad audience, relies on the immediacy of the image rather than on the power of words. The writer's move towards the cinema in the second decade of the twentieth century, and in particular, his cultivation of a hybrid form of literature that he would call the *novela cinematográfica* (cinematographic novel), certainly reflected this desire. But more importantly, this move also suggests that he recognised and sought to harness the power of cinema to organise and control crowds for positive political ends. During the last two decades of his life, Blasco would apply the term cinematographic novel to three different types of works. The 1916 film version of *Sangre y arena* represents the author's first attempt to re-invent himself as the world's first cinematographic novelist: a writer who would create exclusively for the cinema, a hybrid multimedia product that combined text and moving images to tell stories. The release of the film coincided with the publication of a short pamphlet that contained a highly condensed summary of the original novel, as well as still photographs and the film's intertitles. Later Blasco would apply the term to several original screenplays

5 Writing in 1895, before the advent of narrative cinema, Le Bon recognises the power of theatrical performances to instigate crowds and shape their behaviour. See G. Le Bon (2002) pp. 35–36.

or synopses, which he tried to sell to Hollywood studios with little success. Finally, many of the author's late novels use cinematic techniques in their narrative form such that they would be easily adaptable to the cinema, and indeed several of these were bought by American producers and made into successful films.[6]

The adaptation of *Sangre y arena* in 1916 is the first of two films made by the author during his stay in Paris during World War I. With capital from his successful publishing house, Prometeo, and the support of his business associates in Valencia and Barcelona, Blasco founded Prometeo Films while living in Paris in 1915. In collaboration with veteran French director Max André, and encouraged by his friendship with Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, he drew up an ambitious business plan that initially included three other films in addition to the adaptation of *Sangre y arena*: an adaptation of his 1896 novel *Flor de mayo,* an original screenplay titled *La vielle du cinema*, and an adaptation of *Don Quixote.* Only *Sangre y arena* and the now lost *La vielle du cinema* (André 1917) were produced before the venture collapsed in 1917. From letters to his associates, it is known that Blasco not only wrote the screenplay for *Sangre y arena*, but also was responsible for much of the films direction, although he acknowledges that Max André played a crucial advisory role in the pre and post-production stages. The film's exteriors were shot on location in Madrid and Seville; and interiors were shot on sets in Barcelona. Post-production work was done in Paris, and was premiered there on November 11, 1916 at the Coliseum Theater, accompanied by music by Spanish composers Álbeniz, Granados, Bretón and Chapi.

In a letter dated 12 November 1916 Blasco writes to his business associate in Barcelona, describing the event:

> Ayer sábado fue la representación de *Arènes sanglantes*. Gran éxito. Un público de los más distinguidos de París. Estuvo la Infanta Eulalia, la embajadora de España, todas las familias de los ministros americanos y las señoras de muchos políticos franceses. Un público de lo más aristocrático y elegante y, sin embargo, las señoras [sic] rompieron a aplaudir un sin número de veces y gritaron de entusiasmo. Repito que muy bien: estoy satisfecho. (Yesterday was the premiere of *Arènes sanglantes*/*Sangre y arena*. A great success. The most distinguished audience in all of Paris. The Princess Eulalia, the Spanish ambassador's wife, all the families of the ministers from the Americas and the wives of many French politicians were in attendance. Even though it was such an aristocratic and elegant crowd, the women broke into applause numerous times and screamed with enthusiasm. I'll repeat: very good, I am very satisfied. Blasco Ibáñez *Cartas* 1998: 56).

The author's assessment of the first public screening of his film is important for the way in which he describes the spectators and observes their behaviour. Instead of recounting the critical reception of the film by journalists, his evaluation of his success is solely based on the collective reaction of the

6 Among these are *Enemies of Women* (Lynch, 1923) starring Lionel Barrymore based on *Los enemigos de la mujeres* (1919), *The Temptress* (Niblo, 1926) starring Greta Garbo based on *La tierra de todos* (1922), and *Mare Nostrum* (Ingram, 1926) based on the novel (1918) by the same title.

live audience. It is also curious that he identifies the audience as exclusively female – surely husbands or male chaperons accompanied the women he describes. The sense of satisfaction he expresses at the end of the passage is derived from his film's power to spontaneously transform the audience – in spite of its social rank and elegant attire – into a screaming and applauding mass of humanity. His elation at the film's reception appears to be based on the confirmation that he has been able to overcome one of the fundamental problems faced by early cinema: 'the seemingly unpredictable patterns of audience reception and behavior' (Faden 2001: 94). On the one hand, the focus of the letter underscores Blasco's preoccupation with the dynamics of crowd formation and behaviour that is woven into the filmic text; and which is the unifying theme of the 1908 novel upon which it is based. On the other hand, it reveals the basic precepts that determine his approach to cinema and how he sees film within the larger scope of his career as a politician and writer for the masses. In *Sangre y arena*, as well as elsewhere in his work, we can identify several basic ideas that tie Blasco to mainstream thoughts regarding crowds in the early twentieth century: (1) reading and watching films is a collective experience, therefore he theorises individual spectatorship as something that occurs within a crowd; (2) the attraction of joining a crowd is essentially about losing or gaining power – the feminisation of the individual within the crowd being a dominate metaphor of these processes and (3) the assembling power of mass spectacles is at once a democratising force and a degenerative one. By looking to audience reaction instead of to that of critics, Blasco recognises the power of the crowd over the creation and destruction of the individual as celebrity, and as the ultimate arbiter of the success or failure of the artist.

The ways in which crowds form and dissolve, and more importantly, the manner in which the individual can become lost in the mass, were the principal concerns that sparked the rise of the field of social psychology at the end of the nineteenth century. While crowd theorists like Gabriel Tarbe, Gustave Le Bon and Elias Canetti disagree on the nature of the crowd – whether it is a positive or negative forces, or merely a fact of human social behaviour – they concur on identifying that the full realisation of a crowd occurs at the moment when its individual members feel complete identification with the mass and feel safe despite the imposition of anonymity and the subjugation of their free will. They also agree that the attraction of the crowd lies in its apparent power, not only to drawn people together but also to spontaneously and forcefully exercise what appears to be a collective will capable of destruction or creation.[7]

Like all forms of mass entertainment, the main goal of commercial film, from the very beginning, has been to attract large crowds. Lesly Brill observes that '[m]ovies are crowd machines', not only because they gather crowds, but also because they frequently produce images of the crowd as part of the spectacle (*La sortie des usines/Workers Leaving the Factory* (1895)) and as an essential narrative device (*Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein 1925)) (Brill 2006: 1). The tendency of European and American novel and film

7 For an overview of these theories and their evolution in see chapter 2 of P.D. Marshall (1997).

to focus on the exploits of individual heroes, very often overshadows the part played by crowds in the development and resolution of these stories. Rejection or acceptance by the crowd frequently marks the initial trajectory of the hero, and in the end signals the social reintegration and redemption of the individual protagonist and of the mass that once rejected him. With the exception of Soviet film, in many of these narratives the crowd is dissolved in the end as justice and order are restored to the community.

The crowd in *Sangre y arena* not only provides a point of reference for understanding Gallardo's rise and fall, but also functions as a protagonist crucial to the development and denouement of the novel. The story of the bullfighter is paralleled by an equally detailed narrative of the formation and dissolution of the crowd that is instrumental to his celebrity and plays an active role in his demise at the end of the story. The literal image of the mass fans appears almost from the very beginning of the novel, and perhaps serves as point of reference for the reader to begin to identify in equal terms with both the protagonist and with the collective of individuals that adores him. Nevertheless, the manner and mode of the crowd's intervention in the story – once it is fully formed – is not revealed until much later. Its ominous role is however foreshadowed via a set of symbols (in this case objects in mass) that offer insights into the behaviour of actual human crowds, and serve as correlatives for aspects of crowd behaviour that are otherwise difficult to visualise (Brill 2006: 224). Such crowd symbols are prevalent throughout the novel, and are key to understanding how the film version visualises the crowd as a narrative device and attempts to use the resulting images as a mechanism to control the mass of spectators in the cinema. These inanimate objects, described by onomatopoeic adjectives, precede the appearance of the crowd that assembles around Gallardo, and that is responsible for his celebrity aura in the bullring. In the final chapter of the novel in which he meets his death, before the crowd inside the bullring is described for readers, its proximity is alluded to by the noise that it makes which can be heard from the street. The muffled reaction of the mass to the spectacle is compared to the 'mugido de volcán' (the rumbling of volcano) and the 'bramar de olas lejanas' (roar of distant waves) (Blasco Ibañez 1998: 390). Both these images prefigure the impending danger of the crowd and its destructive power as force of nature, which is instinctual and unstoppable once set in motion. Here, Blasco captures the sublime character often attributed to the masses in revolutionary discourses, yet the positive image dissipates when the narrator, after closer observation, ends the description by likening the spectators' cheers to the 'zumbido de moscas' (buzzing of flies) (Blasco Ibañez 1998: 390). The scatological connotation here puts into question the aesthetic as well as moral quality of the spectacle, and debases the mass as the bearer of pestilence. Such symbols crystallise a thoroughly negative image of the mass of spectators in the bullring as an ominous force that destroys individual freewill with an insatiable voracity, and which feeds on the desire to attain fame and fortune.

In his writing, Blasco sought to be as efficient as possible in the presentation of ideas that could be easily comprehended by readers. He writes 'procuro siempre escribir sin oropeles retóricos, llanamente, con el propósito único de que el lector se olvide de que está leyendo, y al terminar la última página le parezca que sale de un sueño o que acaba de desvanarse ante sus ojos una vision cinematográfo' (I always try to write without rhetorical flourishes, plainly, with the sole purpose that reader forgets that he is reading, and when he finishes the last page it seems that he has awoken from a dream or a cinematographic image has just dissolved before his eyes. Laguna Platero 1999: 126). When transferred to the visual medium of silent film, Blasco necessarily does away with the sound metaphors used in the novel and replaces them with images that transmit similar ideas although in a much more literal fashion. The process of crowd formation, suggested by the use of crowd symbols in the novel, is represented on screen for viewers in three phases, which also structure the overall evolution of the film narrative. The first two phases are comprised of a series of images of random individuals gatherings outside of the bullring, on the city streets, whereas the second is made up of shots of the mass of fans taken inside the arena.

The first image of the crowd in formation occurs several minutes into the film: Gallardo's initial rise to fame is corroborated by an image of six men, *vecinos* (neighbours) according to the preceding intertitle, gathered to together reading the newspaper (Figure 1). Two figures appear to be reading aloud, while the others listen attentively. The scene presents a highly schematic representation of the primary mechanism that drives the production of stars and of crowds: the mass media. The newspaper here functions as a crowd symbol since it suggests a much larger configuration of anonymous individuals than the one presently visible on screen, who all read the same story about the debutante bullfighter more or less simultaneously. The single image segues into the second phase in which the virtual crowd is replaced by a burgeoning mass of people that progressively fill the film frame in scenes that lead up to Gallardo's debut in Seville and in his *alternativa* in Madrid.

Figure 1: Gallardo's neighbours read of his success

The scenes shot on-location in the streets of Seville and Madrid present images that are typical of early cinematic portrayals of crowds—such as the Lumiéres famous *La sortie des usine/Workers Leaving the Factory* (Lumiere, 1895) or Eduardo Jimeno's *Salida de misa del Pilar* (Jimeno, 1896)—and, in this way, causes the film to more closely approximate the conventions of what Tom Gunning calls a cinema of attractions; that is, "a cinema that displays its visibility, willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance

Figure 2: The crowd's gaze

to solicit the attention of the spectator" (Gunning 1990: 57). In the second phase, the crowd in *Sangre y arena* is shown in the process of gathering to witness the dual spectacle of the fictional celebrity Juan Gallardo, and the real-life spectacle of the filmmaking apparatus and the celebrity presence of Blasco Ibañez (Figure 2). Such scenes establish a surprising relationship with the audience of spectators: various individuals among the crowd of onlookers cannot resist staring directly at the camera, which results in the breakdown of diegesis. What is more, by making visible the filmmaking process, the attention of both assemblages of spectators merges as both are awed by the spectacle of cinema. These early scenes are transitional since attention is equally divided between the fictional and the real, and the random faces in the crowd staring out at viewers remain separate from the mass; their gazes are neither coordinated nor fixed on a single object or attraction.

The third phase presents the consolidation of perspectives as the random individuals in the street are assembled inside the bullring to witness the diegetic spectacle that centres on the fictional star. Through these scenes, the cinema audience and the on-screen mass of spectators come to focus on the same event: the bullfight and the feats of Gallardo who seeks to win them over. The consolidation of the crowd is announced by a transitional set of shots that eventually fuse the points of view of both spectator groups. It is a widely accepted convention of film analysis that point-of-view-shots and shot/reverse shots are the technical devices by which film positions the spectator, defining the spatial and emotional perspective from which the individual is to view everything (Tratner 2003: 57). Blasco makes it clear that cinematic spectatorship cannot be recounted simply in terms of the connection between an individual and a film, by calling attention to the fact that it is always within the crowd that we find the individual spectator (Schwartz 1998: 179). He does this through long-shots that establish the overall setting and situate the spectator inside the bullring. Wide views of the arena, shot from a camera located in the middle of the stand, function in the same manner as the point-of-view and reverse shots that have become conventions for melding the perspective of the individual viewer with that of the camera (Figure 3). In this case, these shots link the perspective of the 'crowd-in-the-text' with that of the audience through a process of interpellation – to use Althusser's conceptualisation

Figure 3: View from the stand

of the term – that causes the live audience to come face to face with a mirror image of itself (Tratner 2003: 57).

The long-shots used in the sequence showing Gallardo's *alternativa* in Madrid produce a secondary effect that further establishes the connection between the fictional crowd and the audience seated in the movie theatre. The use of a wide-angle lens creates an optical illusion that simulates the existence of continuity between the spaces in which the two groups of spectators are gathered (Figure 3). The camera is positioned within the crowd such that the film's audience perceives the sweeping arc of the ring and the mass of people seated to the right. As in earlier scenes outside of the bullring, several members of the onscreen crowd look directly into the camera, but here the effect is now somewhat different. Part of the enjoyment and pleasure that individuals derive from attending mass spectacles – be it a bullfight or a movie – is based on the sense of being part of a larger group, watching the same event, at the same time. The individuals who look out at the camera show a certain satisfaction that now seems to be derived from more than mere curiosity with the filmmaking apparatus. They appear to be conscious that they are part of the film, and by extension part of the crowd. The visual effect produced on film parallels the novel's description of the crowd during a later episode in the novel. The narrator comments the way in the mass of spectators in the bullring 'Se aplaudía a sí mismo, admiraba su propia majestad, adivinando que el atrevimiento del torero era para reconciliarse con él, para ganar de nuevo su afecto' ([The mass of spectators] applauded itself, admiring its own majesty while discerning that toreador's daring feats were attempted to reconcile himself with it and to regain it's affection. Blasco Ibañez 1998: 399). The crowd in the cinema, like the one on screen, is moved by the film spectacle to applaud an image of itself, taking pleasure both in the bullfight and in the image of itself exerting power over the individual who performs for them. The audience revels in its participation in the event, and witnesses its own role in the production of the spectacle as a key actor in the story.

The extreme intensity of the spectacle is that which ultimately solidifies the individual's identification with the crowd, and dissolves the space that exists between real and fictional spectators. The sweeping, wide-angle long-shots used up to this point give way to a frontal composition in which the spectators now occupy only the upper third of the frame; the barrier that limits the bullring from the crowd covers the lower two thirds (Figure 4). Through the use of an iris-in effect – a decorative fade-in or fade-out in which the image appears or disappears as a growing or diminishing circle commonly used in early cinema – the mass of individual faces in the stands is morphed into

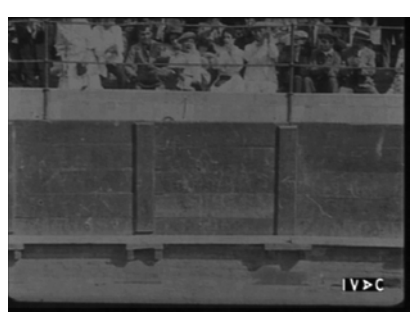

Figure 4: The barrier

Figure 5: An adoring female spectator

a single image of a female spectator who seductively blows kisses to the bullfighter (Figure 5). By reducing the mass of fans to a single image of a woman, Blasco reiterates a metaphor commonly used to describe the psychology and behaviour of the crowd in the late nineteenth century. The analogy, which was soon adapted to describe mass audiences of all sorts, marks the fans of the bullfight as an emotional and irrational being, prone to the exaggeration of sentiments and weak intellectually (Barrows 1981: 47). The scene in question occurs early in the film when Gallardo first wins the affection of the crowd, and when it first becomes clear that he has been seduced by its power. The narrator observes: 'Al entrar en el redondel y escuchar los aplausos de la muchedumbre, el espada se imaginó haber crecido' (Upon entering the ring and hearing the masses applause, the toreador imagined himself as having grown. Blasco Ibañez 1998: 193). Becoming part of the crowd, and the resulting loss of individual freewill, are replicated in the star's succumbing to the whims of fickle and womanish horde that cheers him one day and disdains him the next.

From this point forward attention is turned to Gallardo's personal downfall, and the crowd disappears from the frame. It only returns near the end of the film as the bullfighter attempts to make a comeback after falling out of favour with his fans. The filmmaker employs the same techniques used in the earlier sequence, although with rather different yet complementary connotations. Here, the long-shot that establishes the crowd's point of view, and a corresponding reverse shot of the bullfight, are interrupted by an iris-in of a single man's face shouting insults at Gallardo. Instead of seduction, this is the face of degeneration, another metaphor used by crowd theorists Le Bon and Tarbe, and one that is also picked up by Blasco in his novels, political speeches and newspaper articles. The man is dishevelled and is missing several teeth; his appearance makes us think that perhaps he is even drunk (Figure 6). The *novela cinematográfica* gives a voice to the figure, who shouts in a threatening manner: 'Un guasón le grita cara a cara, al verle llegar a la barrera demudado: — ¡Juy, que te coge! ¡Sarasa!' (A wise guy yelled to him face to face as reached the barrier distraught: 'He almost got you, you faggot!'. Blasco Ibañez 1917: 9). The analogy of the drunkard rounds out the psychological profile of the crowd by highlighting

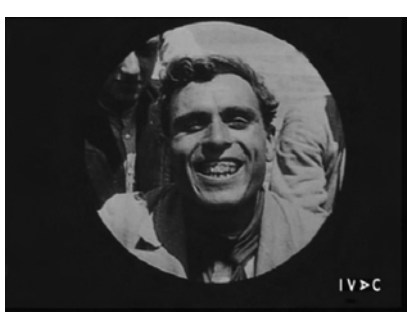

Figure 6: A drunkard

its unpredictable and potentially violent nature character; at the same time it mobilises a widely held view that associated alcoholism with the working classes (Barrows 1981: 72). The audience unexpectedly finds itself face to face with a less than appealing representation of the crowd causing the tenuous identification between the cinema audience and the onscreen crowd to begin to unravel. While the earlier feminisation of the crowd suggested a similar degree of degradation, the placement of this image at the high point of Gallardo's climb to fame causes its full implication to be postponed until the later scene that coincides with the hero's fall from grace. The ultimate effect of the fusion between the individual and the crowd that takes place in the film is revealed to be degenerative and regressive, and thus shakes spectators out of the spell cast by seeing themselves on the screen.

By inserting the crowd into the dynamics of the film, the cinema audience is prompted to identify with the on-screen crowd and to recognise its own status as a crowd (Brill 2006: 9). As Gallardo's fortunes in the bullring flounder, Blasco intentionally reverses the process of convergence that occurs over the course of the film, and he appears to seek to dissolve the link between the cinema audience and the on-screen crowd in anticipation of the films' denouement. Just as the crowd plays a crucial role in the development of the plot, it also has a hand in the resolution: the mass of fans and the attraction of regaining its favour cause Gallardo to return to the ring where he will meet his death. Thus, instead of drawing the audience closer to the on-screen crowd, the imagery of the final minutes of the film serves to repel spectators and to incite them to reject their mirror image. In the closing sequence, the scene of the bullfighter being mourned by friends and family cuts to an image of the crowd which again is shown as occupying the upper half of the frame. Now, however, a mesh of ropes above the wooden barrier, obviously installed to protect the audience from the danger in the ring, is more clearly visible as the cheering mass pushes and pulls on the cords as if it wished to tear them down. The beast needing to be contained is no longer loose in the arena, but is in the stands, as the final intertitle that precedes this frame indicates: 'Tras la barrera una bestia sangrienta: la muchedumbre enloquecida' (Beyond the barrier a blood-stained beast: the maddening crowd. Blasco Ibañez 1917: 11).

Figure 7: The maddening crowd

Even though the cinema audience is dissolved as it is repelled by the final images of the film, the diegetic crowd formed onscreen remains a foreboding presence that is nourished by the spectacle that continues in spite of Gallardo's death. The ambiguous conclusion of *Sangre y arena* exposes

the apparent contradictions of Blasco's attitude towards the masses, and by extension towards the film audiences that he so wished to form as consumers of the new artistic media. The identification of the crowd in the film as proletarian is much more explicit in the film than it is in the novel, and so makes it much more evident that notwithstanding his rhetoric and self-styling as the defender of the people, he desired to win over a middle-class audience. The writer's endeavour to make narrative film is part of a more general trend to wash the cinema's image as working class entertainment and to build an audience among the more affluent urban middle-class and bourgeoisie by offering a more sophisticated product. *Sangre y arena* indeed plays on middle-class fears of the masses in order to gain a greater degree of control over them as a potential film audience for the purposes of profit; however, the new media also provided Blasco with a mechanism to strengthen the political power of a class whose cohesion and identity in Spain lagged far behind the rest of Europe.

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Nemesio M. Sobrevila, Walter Benjamin, and the provocation of film

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Abstract

The philosophical and aesthetic questions explored in Nemesio M. Sobrevila's 1929 film El sexto sentido *are also central to the film criticism of Walter Benjamin. This essay looks at three closely interrelated concepts which interested both men in their work: the representation of filmic space, the emergence of film as a crisis of representation, and the sociopolitical implications of the separation of the image from its referent through editing (the 'cut').*

Keywords

Nemesio Sobrevila
Walter Benjamin
El sexto sentido
Spanish silent film
philosophy

Independent Basque filmmaker Nemesio M. Sobrevila (1889–1969) was an active participant in early twentieth-century debates on the socio-political implications of both avant-garde and popular visual culture.[1] In his 1929 feature *El sexto sentido*/*The Sixth Sense* Sobrevila explores the ways in which film spectators can be carried away by what is barely visible and how individuals can interpret forms of mass culture in dramatically different ways. This is precisely what Walter Benjamin famously pointed out in his 1937 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction': that film had become the medium of nonauratic art, an art that had been freed from its earlier religious or cultic function because of its ability to reorganise space and time for perception. This essay understands the metacinematic and philosophical positions of Sobrevila's *El sexto sentido* in light of Benjamin's sensitivity to the strangeness of the still young cinematic medium by considering three closely interrelated concepts which interested both men in their work: the representation of filmic space, the emergence of film as a crisis of representation, and the separation of the image from its referent through editing (the 'cut').

The plot of *El sexto sentido* consists of an exaggeratedly formulaic *costumbrista* tale of two couples, the first comprised of the optimist Carlos (played by Enrique Durán) and the popular dancer Carmen (Antoñita Fernández) and the second, that of the pessimist León (Felipe Sánchez) and Luisa (Gertrudis Pajares). The story begins when well-to-do Carlos gives an engagement ring to Carmen and Carmen's father pressures her into selling it so he can gamble the money away at the bullfights. Carmen is forced to visit a pawnbroker to whom she sells the ring, causing her to arrive late to her daily rehearsal of the American-style musical review in which the young woman performs. Her father waits for her there, and after she

1 Born in Bilbao, Nemesio Sobrevila studied architecture in Barcelona and Paris, where he first came into contact with the avant-garde in the plastic arts between the World Wars. A professional architect, designer of gardens and inventor, he moved to Madrid in 1927 to start his film career, working most often with the studio Madrid Films, and with his friends, the producer and director Eusebio Fernández Ardavín, Ardavín's brother Luis, and Puerto Rican cameraman Armando Pou (Fernández Colorado 75). Independently wealthy, Sobrevila funded his own highly regarded non-commercial films. By all reliable accounts (Sobrevila, Marquina) the production values were high, the cinematography excellent, and the sets

changes in her dressing room, she reluctantly hands over the money. She is sexually harassed by the show's director, and the father, who has stayed to watch his daughter perform, defends his daughter's honour by physically attacking the director. Carmen is fired on the spot, but her father repents of his many vices and declares that Carmen will never more have to work to put food in their mouths – that he will get a job in order to free Carmen from the indignity of making a living by showing her body in public.

Meanwhile, the pessimist León is tormented by unfounded thoughts of Luisa's infidelity. Carlos tries to distract him and tells him to go visit Kamus (played by actor and painter Ricardo Baroja), whom Carlos calls 'el hombre que es capaz de conocer la verdad [the man who is capable of knowing the truth.]' In the beginning of the film Kamus is portrayed as a mystical, all-knowing sage who lives in his small attic studio, screening the daily documentary film footage he has acquired for his own diversion. Set against rising smoke and the shadows of moving film reels, Kamus develops the film in his own half-magical and half-modern laboratory (Figure 1). It is in the second half of the film, when Kamus's motives are revealed and questioned, that he will be portrayed quite differently, sitting lazily in a chair and clutching his camera along with a bottle of wine. León first goes to Kamus's attic studio where Kamus explains in a series of intertitles how he uses his camera to capture the essence and feel of urban life.

> Este ojo extrahumano, nos traerá la verdad. . . . [V]e más profundamente que nosotros . . . más grande, más pequeño, más deprisa, más despacio . . . Lo han prostituido haciéndole ver como nosotros pensamos . . . pero yo le dejo

Figure 1: Sage / vigilante filmmaker Kamus in his attic studio

(expertly and painstakingly constructed by Sobrevila himself) were the best that anyone had seen in Spain in the 1920s. His first film was the full-length feature *Al Hollywood madrileño*, seen in a series of private screenings in 1927 (now unfortunately lost), and his second *El sexto sentido*, which enjoyed one commercial screening in 1929 and several private screenings thereafter (see Minguet Batllori). The closest Sobrevila ever got to commercial success in the film industry was a brief collaboration with Luis Buñuel in the Filmófono film studios in 1935 (Aranda 207–14). Sobrevila wrote and directed a play called "La hija de Juan Simón" which was shown in the Alcázar Theater in 1928. Film producer Ricardo Urgoiti liked it so much that Sobrevila was invited to make the play into a film of the same title. The film starred Ana María Custodio and Angelillo, a Communist flamenco singer. Sobrevila designed the set and filmed two experimental scenes which remained in the film but he fell behind the company's strict schedule and was replaced by Buñuel for a brief period, then by José Luis Saenz de Heredia, the cousin of Falange founder José Primo de Rivera. The film was neither sophisticated nor intellectual but is, as Aranda states, 'a case of an intellectual stylization of bad

> solo . . . libre . . . y él me trae lo que ve con precisión matemática. Verá usted las cosas de una manera distinta, con nuestro Sexto Sentido.
> This extrahuman eye will show us the truth . . . . it sees deeper than we can . . . it sees bigger, smaller, faster, slower . . . . It has been prostituted to be made to look the same way that we think . . . but I leave it alone . . . free . . . and it brings me what it sees with mathematical precision. You will see things in a different way, with our Sixth Sense.

This statement sets the stage for a philosophical questioning of the possibilities of there being a film controlled neither by the artistic values of the director nor by the ideology of the marketplace, but structured by technology itself, which, it is assumed in the first half of the film, is incapable of being subjective and can only reveal the truth. The first half of the film lends intellectual authority to the figure of Kamus which allows the viewer to seriously consider his cinematic experiment. The second half, however, tears down the artist's contentions that it is possible to leave the camera alone to reveal heretofore hidden truths about the city and the behavior of its inhabitants.

Kamus, in order to demonstrate what he means, rolls his series of chaotic documentary films, what he calls 'un experimento en blanco y negro' [an experiment in black and white] – a phrase which directly references the New Objectivist films of Walter Ruttman and DzigaVertov so important to avant-garde filmmakers in the late 1920s. With *El sexto sentido* Sobrevila very clearly reacted against New Objectivism, however, even going so far as to call his 1929 film a 'película de retaguardia' [a retro-garde film].[2] The camera at this point is seemingly set free, an effect accomplished by a profusion of optical illusions, superimpositions (shots in which one or more images are printed on top of one another), extreme camera angles, and one long sequence shot that pans down to view the inner core of a typical working-class apartment building, then quickly but gracefully tilting up to capture the Art Deco details of Madrid's Cine Callao. Kamus says at this point that '[e]sto es el verdadero Madrid – visto sin ninguna deformación literaria [this is the real Madrid – seen without literary deformation.]' After capturing the rhythms and patterns of traffic in the centre of the capital, the camera captures the beach and elegantly structured Art Deco pool of the recreation area which used to grace the Manzanares River, followed by a number of close-ups of women's legs seen from below, about which the voyeur Kamus muses 'y qué cosas habrá visto, sin que ellas se enteren [and what things it must have seen, without the women finding out].[3]

Among the shots of women's legs is one of Carmen in her dressing room with her father, precisely when she hands him the money that she acquired from selling her engagement ring. When León sees this, he mistakenly concludes that Carmen is a prostitute handing money to her pimp. León's tells Carlos and this information tears the couple apart. Carmen's father, protecting his daughter's honour once again, goes to visit Kamus and beats him mercilessly. Carlos then visits Kamus, and upon viewing the

taste, charged with invention and humor' (112). With the outbreak of the Civil War, Sobrevila fled to France, where he lived for a short time before settling in Argentina, where he worked as an urban planner until his death in 1969 (Unsain 45–50).

2 Aesthetically, what Sobrevila attempted in *El sexto sentido* is much different from what his better-known avant-garde contemporaries in other countries such as Dziga Vertov and Walter Ruttman sought to do (Gubern *Proyector* 175–181). Unlike Vertov and Ruttman, whose 1920s films Sobrevila parodies, Spanish filmmakers such as Buñuel, Dalí and Sobrevila considered popular, not 'pure' or avant-garde cinema, to be the site of the most meaningful experiments with new cinematic technologies and poetics (Larson).

3 These disjointed segments, curiously enough, closely resemble the ending of Walter Ruttman's 1927 film *Berlin, Symphony of a City*. Just before both films draw to a close, for example, the viewer is left with an inverted image of a modernist building that is turning in a movement unique to cinematic space. In Sobrevila's film this building is the Telefónica Building, built with the capital of foreign investor ITT and, in the late 1920s, the tallest building on the Gran Vía.

Figure 2: Carlos and Carmen view the evidence

film in question, recognises that it is Carmen's father who has received the money whereupon he shouts, '¡Es peor un pesimista que una canalla! [A pessimist is worse than scum!]'. For Carlos, it is León's pessimism and traditional outlook that are more dangerous even than Kamus's cinematic experiment. Carlos then rips the footage of Carmen in her dressing room from the film reel and brings it to Carmen's home to show it to her (Figure 2). Carmen's father, who has found work at the Sociedad de Investigaciones Científicas [The Scientific Research Society], is posing in his new uniform when Carlos arrives and he tells Carlos the truth about the engagement ring. The reconciliation of the couple occurs after all three view the evidence in the form of the filmstrip (Figure 3). The portability of film and the ability of the medium to be seen in part or as a whole by different viewers have an enormous impact on the lives of those 'caught' and preserved by its gaze. The ways in which the film spectators in *El sexto sentido* (Carlos, Carmen, Carmen's father and Kamus himself) interpret their own images on the screen are based on entirely subjective motivations and understandings of their own roles in society.

What is unique about *El sexto sentido* is that the truth does not ultimately reside in the image itself: the image is just one element in the construction of meaning. This is clear in the plot, as outlined above, but it works its way into the film's very structure as well. The film is a reformulation of a traditional *castizo* tale, but this is only a pretext by means of which Sobrevila theorises the ontological possibilities and pitfalls of the camera and the possible social roles of both avant-garde and popular film. It is the existence of Kamus's avant-garde films within the predominantly

Figure 3: Subsequent family reconciliation

costumbrista film that sets up the main conflict of the story. This conflict is resolved when it is revealed that the seemingly objective camera of the sage Kamus is little more than an instrument of deception in the hands of a madman. The initial statements made in Kamus's attic about the superior objectivity of science and technology turn out to be a farce. In this urban love story the technological aspects of film as a medium (its reproducibility and its transportability) as well as its nonauratic nature divorced of context prove to be threats to meaningful human relationships.

In the 1920s there were many contrasting positions being taken by avant-garde filmmakers and visual artists on the creation and perception of images influenced by new technologies and understandings of modern space and time. Benjamin's essay was written ten years after Sobrevila finished his film, but the commonalities between 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' and *El sexto sentido* are striking. Compared to Siegfried Kracauer's film criticism of the 1920s, for example, Benjamin's essay comments more directly on the main concerns of *El sexto sentido*. Kracauer was a colleague of Benjamin's at the Berlin publication *Frankfurter Zeitung* from 1922 to 1933. Both men worked and discussed their ideas with other intellectuals such as Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno – other members of what would collectively come to be called the Frankfurt School.[4]

A significant difference between the criticism of Kracauer and that of Benjamin – the critical difference that brings Sobrevila's philosophy of film closer to Benjamin's than Kracauer's – lies in their very different notions of spectatorship.[5] In Kracauer's 1928 essay 'The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies,' for example, he engages in a critique of the ideology of film which

4 Kracauer's 1963 *Das Ornament des Masse* (translated into English in 1995 by Thomas Levin and titled *The Mass Ornament*) is a compilation of the most important of the critic's Weimar film criticism.

5 Schlüpmann attributes this difference between the two colleagues to Kracauer's philosophical training: 'the influence of phenomenology was decisive for Kracauer. . . . Kracauer describes the experience of cultural disintegration as marked by the absence of meaning and coherence, of absolute values and of objective truths' (98). In 1963 Theodor Adorno wrote 'The Curious Realist' about his long-time friend Kracauer. The text was first delivered as a radio address. Adorno here talks about Kracauer's passionate readings of Kant and Heidegger and describes how 'Georg Simmel trained Kracauer's capacity to interpret specific objective phenomena in terms of general structures that, according to this view, appeared in them' (162). It is of interest to us here as we focus briefly on the philosophical differences between Benjamin and Kracauer that in this same essay Adorno notes that in 1923 Benjamin called Kracauer an 'enemy of philosophy' because of his relative ignorance of Hegel's philosophy (161).

has many commonalities with that articulated years later in the 'Culture Industry' sections of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: under the rule of capital, film production necessarily becomes a mirror of existing society and serves to maintain its structures of domination. In 'The Little Shopgirls' Kracauer mocks the delight of the female audience, displacing his own fascination with the medium onto the cliché of female stupidity (Schlüppman 99). Benjamin similarly wrote about the social space of the film theatre and the experience of filmgoers both male and female, but in 'The Work of Art' he always acknowledges his own fascination with film. For Kracauer film was a way for the powerful to hide the truth from the masses, whereas for Benjamin cinematic illusion had an aesthetic significance not only as a way to hide the truth but also as something capable of uncovering a reality which lacked any true coherence. Benjamin valued fantasy because he knew that some spectators would be aware of the great distance between what was on the movie screen and what actually surrounded them and find in that distance enough dissatisfaction to want to dissent. In short, Benjamin much more than Kracuauer acknowledged the social role of film, the critical capacity of the spectator and the importance of fantasy and distraction in the life of the alienated modern individual.

Film as a new experience of space

> The characteristics of the film lie not only in the manner in which man presents himself to mechanical equipment but also in the manner which, by means of this apparatus, man can represent his environment.
>
> (Benjamin 235)

El sexto sentido expresses the desire on the part of the masses to, as Benjamin put it, 'bring things closer spatially and humanly' (223). León, Carlos, Carmen and her father have the desire to 'get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproductions' (223) in order to piece together their own version of past events in order to move ahead into the future. Although artistic production in the service of the cult, according to Benjamin, had depended on the mystery of its not being in view as well as 'its unique existence at the place where it happens to be', photography, the phonograph record, and film 'enable the original to meet the beholder halfway' (223). The camera as an object is featured prominently throughout the film, alternately clutched in Kamus's arms either as a weapon or as a form of comfort. The first half of the film features Kamus as a mystical sorcerer living in shadows. As mentioned earlier, the process of developing film is portrayed anachronistically as a kind of alchemy, replete with flames and smoke set against the shadows of film reels. In the second half of the film when the spectator learns that Kamus is in no sense a genius and his intentions far from innocent, the camera is seen in Kamus's hands accompanied by a bottle of wine and the projector run by an emotionally unstable child.

When Kamus's young assistant screens the chaotic documentary footage for Kamus and León, there is an unsettling 360-degree pan where initially the spectator looks simultaneously through the lens of the camera and the film projector at Kamus's private movie screen, which is no more than a sheet hanging on a wall. As the camera turns, the spectator gets a better sense of the spatial layout of the dark and cramped attic. Halfway through this pan we find ourselves facing the film projector from where the images we are seeing have presumably come. The audience is forced to come face to face with the threat of the very film technology that has caused so much trouble and confusion in the lives of Carlos and Carmen. Its intrusion into the private lives of the protagonists is kept at bay until we ourselves confront the technology head-on. In this and subsequent scenes the camera is seen as an aggressive and powerful tool that captures for public consumption spaces that normally remain private. Kamus gains a sense of control when he secretly captures images of people in public spaces and watches them again and again in the privacy of his own attic – an extremely rare privilege for a private citizen in the 1920s.

There is a euphoric sense of liberation when we view, along with the shocked León, what Kamus's camera has captured during its supposed meandering through the streets of Madrid. This highly experimental film within a film restructures space in a revolutionary way. Benjamin explains at one point the many possibilities of the filmic creation of space:

> [o]ur taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. With the close-up space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. (236)

The fantastic ability that film has of being able to make the familiar strange is celebrated in *El sexto sentido*. The sight of hundreds of similarly clad feet walking across the Gran Vía allows us a radically new view of human movement, forcing us to focus on the synchronicity, uniformity and speed of Madrid's modern pedestrians. The movement of six simultaneously rotating images of the Plaza Cibeles plays with our previous understanding and perception of this central and iconic urban location. Most of all, the previously mentioned long continuous shot capturing the interior *corrales* of buildings where working class women hang their laundry to dry and then extending into a bird's-eye view of the Cine Callao creates a remarkably new and open filmic space. The camera records spaces that cannot be seen in their entirety by the human eye by forcing the spectator to pay attention to certain details never seen before – but these are details carefully chosen and featured by the cameraman, editor and director, as we are reminded later in the film. What is more, in the midst of the above-mentioned 'far-flung ruins and debris' the urban spaces

that are created in *El sexto sentido* are revolutionary because they can be reproduced with each screening and interpreted differently by each spectator. Indeed, the creation of multiple perspectives is one of the important ways that the experimental, avant-garde nature of the film is linked to the more traditional plot, as we have seen.

Film as a crisis of representation

> In comparison to the stage scene, filmed behavior lends itself more readily to analysis because it can be isolated more easily.
>
> (Benjamin 236)

The viewing of behaviour both in space and over time is one of the great pleasures of film. Discussion of this cinematic experience is, after all, what animates much film criticism. Philosophical and aesthetic concepts such as context, causality and movement were forever changed with the advent of film and photography. The process of technological reproducibility at work in modern media has defined the production and reception of film. Natter points out that '[f]or Benjamin, the social-technical-aesthetic dimensions of film at least potentially provided cognitive grounds for the overcoming of an aesthetic whose value-markets remained concepts such as authenticity, eternal value, mystery, and genius' (217): the values embodied in the beginning of *El sexto sentido* by Kamus, who, the film spectator eventually learns, is little more than a well-read alcoholic with a movie camera. *El sexto sentido* reminds us that *all* film – not just avant-garde film – has brought about a crisis of representation regarding the sign and its referent in the social world. The sign, as the materialised mediation between signifier and signified, can no longer have its identity contained by reference to an initial context that generated it.

The transportable and reproducible strip of film that is viewed first by Carlos in Kamus's attic (Figure 2) and then by Carlos, Carmen and her father in their home (Figure 3) changes the lives of all who see it. Interpreted one way by the pessimist León, the image from one perspective destroys the young love that lies at the centre of the traditional plot. Literally torn out of its sequence in anger, stolen from Kamus's film reel and transported to a new location, the image restores order by assuring Carlos of Carmen's honour. However, the image also points to the very unsettling 'truth' that life is a series of deceptions and that human trust is impossible because no one person can ever see the 'full picture'. By focusing on the handful of frozen images on the filmstrip, the protagonists realise how Kamus's films have been erroneously interpreted. They ignore the fact that out of economic necessity Carmen has been forced to work in an environment where she is a sexual object and routinely harassed by her employer. They ignore the fact that Carmen's father is addicted to gambling and regularly puts the welfare of his daughter in danger. The crisis of representation inherent in film is present in the overly abrupt "happy"

ending of *El sexto sentido*, in which a handful of images at the end seemingly negate the conflicts of the rest of the film. According to both Benjamin and Sobrevila, then, in spite of the fact that film often lays claim to potential totality, the isolation and lack of context of the behaviour captured on film are what make it as subjective as other art forms.

The revolutionary potential of 'the cut'

> The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology.
>
> (Benjamin 233)

Both Benjamin in his essay and Sobrevila in his film assert that according to a traditional understanding of the representation process the notion of context makes the sign stable, repeatable or transparent. Any presumption of a correspondence linking image and thing, however, has been unhinged by film editing or what Benjamin calls 'the cut'. In other words, editing gives filmic images an identity thoroughly permeated by technology. The unavoidable separation of an image from immediate context (object or event) makes the transport of the filmic image a constitutive aspect of its condition. According to Benjamin and in contrast to Kracauer, these transported or edited images are then presented to a film public who, in contrast to theatre-goers still used to personal contact with the actor, are invited to discern the extinguished aura and thereby given the position of critics. Paradoxically, moviegoers can be conscious of how a film's story is produced by editing and this makes them more critical of the often great distance between what they are seeing on screen and their situation in the society in which they live.

By responding to the provocation of New Objectivism, *El sexto sentido* initially lends some authority to Kamus's claims to rational objectivity through the camera. In the first part of *El sexto sentido* Kamus claims that he wanders the city of Madrid letting his camera capture whatever scenes it wants. According to Kamus (and as was mentioned before), this will enable the spectator to see Madrid as it really is, without the interference of an artist or editor: 'esto es el verdadero Madrid, visto sin ninguna deformación literaria [this is the real Madrid, seen without literary deformation.]' The rest of the film, however, proves just how impossible it is to objectively capture reality since the cinema's combination of human agency and technology result in a thoroughly ideological cultural product open to a wide variety of interpretations. The director is initially built up only to be subsequently torn down as morally and ethically corrupt.

Although everyday life and *El sexto sentido*'s "happy" ending present the appearance of regulated coherence and order, the imposition of the cut as a precondition of an object's representation permits viewers the recognition otherwise. The dynamite exploding the natural order, according to Benjamin, 'reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject'

(236). Benjamin's considerations lead him to suggest that a 'different nature' evidently 'opens itself to the camera than opens itself to the naked eye' (236). Evidently, the camera doesn't simply 'see' like the human eye, but instead organises presentation according to its own optical laws, uncannily similar to, yet essentially different from human sense perception. The introductory intertitles at the beginning of *El sexto sentido* tell the viewer that

> A pesar de los múltiples sistemas filosóficos, desconocemos la Verdad. Para conocerla, necesitamos añadir a nuestros imperfectos sentidos, la precisión de la mecánica. El atrabiliario Kamus, mezcla de artista, borracho y filósofo, cree haber descubierto en el cinematógrafo un SEXTO SENTIDO.
> [In spite of the existence of many philosophical systems, we cannot know Truth. In order to know it, we need to add to our imperfect senses the precision of the mechanical. The ill-humored Kamus, combination of artist, drunk and philosopher, believes that he has discovered in film a SIXTH SENSE.]

El sexto sentido both presents and then critiques the idea that it is the mechanical and scientific nature of cinema that will grant the modern filmmaker the power to perceive the world as it really is. As we saw earlier, Kamus asserts that the camera is 'un ojo extrahumano [an extrahuman eye]' that has been 'prostituido haciéndole ver como nosotros pensamos [prostituted to be made to look the same way that we think.]' Kamus's dream of the creation of an extra-human camera eye that sees the world objectively is made impossible by the fact that images are always edited, sequenced, or limited in some way, even if this is due to the limits of human physical endurance to film and make a spectacle of real life. The creation of an ideological, highly edited, manipulated and manipulative film is likened to engaging in prostitution, which is significant because of the accusation of prostitution at the heart of the film's traditional plot. This begs the question: on an allegorical level, if one equates the uncut, 'objective' film with a traditionally honourable woman and the more popular, subjective film as somehow dishonoured, which is more desirable? The spectator is forced to answer this question at the end of the film. Shots of women's legs from low angles, medium shots and pans of young women swimming and Carmen's seductive dancing raise certain expectations in the viewer. It is an intimate image of Carmen's body in her dressing room, after all, that results in the misunderstanding that drives the plot and provides the premise for the philosophical discussions that drive the entire film. If one pushes this gendered allegory further, the act of editing is an act of illicit physical pleasure and a form of exploitation. The unedited representation (if that is possible) is seen as more objective, honourable and socially acceptable. The film allows the spectator the rare opportunity to experience a series of voyeuristic pleasures, but then forcefully condemns this type of viewing as a socially harmful vice. Because it plays on the idea of a multiplicity of perspectives and hinges on various interpretations of

the same image, the film does not take a concrete position as much as offer a space for the consideration of modernity for a largely urban public characterised by the increasing number and visibility of women and concerned with the erosion of gender hierarchies.

Most of *El sexto sentido* is involved in the development of the *costumbrista* story of the dancer Carmen and her lover Carlos. The film is unique in that it is also deeply immersed in the theoretical debates over the avant-garde of its time and follows narrative and genre conventions that question the parameters of reception and the audience's horizon of expectations. This is only possible because the plot is metacinematic in that it hinges on the premise that film can deceive – that cameraman and spectator *both* promote the illusion of a spatio-temporal continuum. What all of the characters learn by the end of the film is exactly how the medium categorically depends on perspective to create a representation of reality. As Román Gubern has pointed out, *El sexto sentido*, in effect, presents three radically different ways of looking at reality: that of the mechanical eye, that of the optimist Carlos, and that of the pessimist León (*Historia del cine* 68). Kamus is ultimately peripheral, fooling himself into believing that he has gained any fuller understanding of reality or human nature through his voyeurism.

> The instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics.
>
> (Benjamin 224)

In conclusion, both the metacinematic mode and the themes of *El sexto sentido* allowed for a timely and complex philosophical debate on the spatial, representational and technological possibilities of film for a modernising Spanish society. Through the introduction of avant-garde methods of filmmaking Sobrevila comments on the crisis of representation that film was unleashing in the first decades of the twentieth century. Sobrevila in his film and Benjamin in his essay urge modern citizens to understand film for what it is: a radically new way of making conscious and unconscious desires into a mass spectacle that is also a highly technological, political art form. These philosophical and aesthetic debates in which both men participated were no mere academic musings. They were an integral part of a radical rethinking of the social roles of culture during a time when mass communication technologies were altering how people saw themselves and others. When Benjamin talks about cinema as a new art form distanced from ritual and lacking an aura he outlined the other organising principle of mass culture: politics. Both men would eventually be caught up in and displaced by the politics of their time, Sobrevila fleeing to Argentina in 1939 and Benjamin dying in Port Bou, caught between French and Spanish military police one year later, in 1940. A paradoxical politics of film is inherent to the works of the two men discussed here – a paradox that goes hand in hand with the dreams and nightmares of

modern society. Film was perceived as the incarnation of the modern, the product of an industry and new form of mass consumption that resulted in dramatic changes in social, sexual and gender relations, in the material of everyday life, and in perception and experience. It appealed not just to avant-garde artists and intellectuals in urban centres but also to emerging mass publics everywhere. One of the fears of Benjamin in particular was that the culture of this industrially produced, mass-based experience of modernity would be prone to political manipulation, and of course he was proven correct. Sobrevila likewise explored questions about perspective, and the creation of meaning through the film editing process. While technologies of representation are constantly changing, their reflections on the sociopolitical implications of culture are worth considering once again.

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Two takes on gender in Argentine *film noir*

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Abstract

Two popular Argentine films noirs display original attitudes regarding gender. Carlos Hugo Christensen's Si muero antes de despertar/If I Should Die Before I Wake *(1952) adapts a short story by US 'noir' writer Cornell Woolrich in a way that questions Woolrich's celebration of the 'tough' male. Mario Soffici's* Rosaura a las diez/Rosaura at Ten O'Clock *(1958) is a self-conscious reprise of the femme fatale that traces the reiterative scripting of 'woman' by the film's protagonist, her transformation into a destabilising menace, and the expunging of the threat through further writing. The representation of the feminine in these films is remarkable for the time when they were made.*

Keywords

film noir
femme fatale
masculinity
Carlos Hugo Christensen
Mario Soffici
Cornell Wollrich

In 1946 French critics Nino Frank and Jean-Pierre Chartier coined the term *film noir* to refer exclusively to recent movies from the United States. Beginning in 1955, however, when Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton included in their book on the subject a chapter on French movies (2002: 127–138), scholars began to recognise that *film noir* 'is not solely an indigenous American form' but is found also in France, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom (Spicer 2002: 175). Jordan and Morgan-Tamosunas note that 'Spain's indigenous *cine negro* [*film noir*] . . . emerged in the early 1950s' and trace its evolution during and after Franco's dictatorship (1998: 87–92). Elena Medina de la Viña remarks that several *noir* movies 'marcan hitos en el cine español' ['are landmarks in Spanish cinema'] (2000: 9).

Recently, Claudia Goity and César Maranghello have applied the *cine negro* label to Argentine movies, but they diverge regarding which movies they consider *noir*. They concur in identifying Daniel Tinayre's *Pasaporte a Río*/*Passport to Rio* (1948) as *cine negro* (Maranghello 2005: 118; Goity 2000: 435), but while Goity applies the same label to Leon Klimovsky's *El pendiente*/*The Earring* (1951) (2000: 430), Maranghello calls it a "melodrama policial" ["crime melodrama"] (2005: 130).

Such variances are unsurprising. *Film noir* is 'notoriously difficult . . . to classify and define' (Desser 2003: 516). Divergences appear in the earliest writing on the topic. Frank, Chartier, and Borde and Chaumeton's shared *noir* corpus consists of a single film: *Murder, My Sweet* (Edward Dymtrik, 1944).[1] Given the circular relationship between the makeup of a set and its members' traits, it is not remarkable that their descriptions of *film*

1 Borde and Chaumeton also join Frank in classifying *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941) as *noir* (2002: 161). They categorise *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), which Frank and Chartier discuss, and *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944), listed by Frank, as 'criminal psychology' films (2002: 161–162) – an expression Frank uses interchangeably with '*film noir*' – and remark that these movies are related to *film noir* because it includes a stereotypical *noir* character (1955: 54; 2002: 44).

They also classify *The Postman Also Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946), which Chartier discusses, as a 'criminal psychology' located

noir diverge and that later scholars, who built on their ideas, also hold differing views.

The current article, which studies the treatment of gender in Carlos Hugo Christensen's *Si muero antes de despertar*/*If I Should Die Before I Wake* (1952) and Mario Soffici's *Rosaura a las diez*/*Rosaura at Ten O'Clock* (1958), is not an appropriate venue for a detailed examination or an attempt to resolve these differences.[2] It follows the majority of scholars who have written on the subject (including Frank and Borde and Chaumeton) in considering *film noir* a reworking of the codes governing the crime film.[3]

The emphasis is not on crime per se. As Borde and Chaumeton, who call 'the presence of crime' *film noir*'s 'most distinctive stamp', explain, 'it doesn't have a monopoly here'. Rather, *film noir* 'responds to a certain kind of emotional resonance as singular in time as it is in space . . . [and] is a film of death, in all sense of the word' (2002: 5). It chronicles human death and reflects the demise of an era. The product of a world in upheaval, it is 'ambivalent about modernity and progress' (Naremore 1998: 45) and is driven by a desire to 'make sense of the modern . . . situation' (Telotte 1989: 218).

Borde and Chaumeton attribute its development to the upheavals of World War II and, in France, to 'the Indochina affair' (2002: 127–28). In Argentina the 1940s and 1950s witnessed the arrival and overthrow of the Peronist government, and it is likely that the start of Argentine *noir* cinema at this time reflects an unsettled social atmosphere in which previous crime movies seemed unrealistically tame. This is not to suggest that Argentine *noir* movies reproduce Peronist ideology. The two movies studied in this article show progressive attitudes about gender that accord with Perón government's granting women's suffrage in 1947, but neither of the films' directors were Peronists. Christensen was one of a host of filmmakers blacklisted by the Perón government (Maranghello 'Orígenes' 2000: 171). Although Soffici in 1945 directed Eva Duarte, who was soon to become Perón's wife, in *La cabalgata del circo*/*The Circus Calvacade* and *La pródiga*/*The Prodigal* (not premiered until 1984), the only movie in which she was the lead, he resented the Perón government's censorship of the media and described the Perón years as artistically stifling (Grinberg 1993: 46).

For Frank the innovative nature of the *noir* movies is to be found in a new psychological depth, facilitated by the use of voiceover.[4] For Chartier *film noir* is characterised by its 'disgusted point of view regarding human behavior' (1999: 21), its inclusion of characters who are 'monsters, criminals and psychopaths without redemptive qualities', and its use of expressionistic cinematography (1999: 23).[5] For Borde and Chaumeton, the movies' distinguishing qualities are 'the oneiric quality specific to the series' (Borde and Chaumeton 2002: 11) and their strangeness or uncanny nature (Naremore 2002: xiii).[6]

Si Muero antes de despertar and *Rosaura a las diez* meet all three sets of criteria although neither movie has previously been classified as *film noir*.[7] Both explore the human psyche, as Frank deems essential, and both use

'on the fringes of authentic film noir' (2002: 68). They call *The Lost Weekend* (Billy Wilder, 1945), which Chartier called *noir*, a 'social tendencies' movie and write that it was 'classified, somewhat superficially, as belonging to the noir genre' (2002: 114).

2 The two movies occupy an important place in Argentine film history. *Si muero antes de despertar* received an unequivocally favourable review in *Gente de Cine*, a prestigious journal that reviewed only movies of special merit (Roland 1952: 10). *Rosaura a las diez* received praise from international critics when it was presented in the Cannes Festival two months later (Anon. 1958, 'Cómo se juzgó'. Anon. 1958, 'Rosaura a las diez'. Roland 1958).

3 Frank's essay deals exclusively with crime movies. Borde and Chaumeton, citing Frank, concur that crime is essential to *film noir* (2002: 5). Most later scholars, including Goity, agree with this. Even for Chartier, crime is central. Only one of the US movies he discusses – *The Lost Weekend* – is not a crime movie. As noted, Borde and Chaumeton question calling it *noir*, as do many later scholars. James Naremore calls its classification as *film noir* surprising 'in light of the fact that it disappears from most subsequent writings' (1998: 13). In contrast with Frank

voiceover, which he identified as facilitating this (1999: 16). Both include the scandalous characters Chartier found distasteful – the police in Christensen's film use his epithet, 'monster', to describe the killer, and the *femme fatale* in Soffici's movie is among the 'psychopaths without redemptive qualities' that Chartier catalogues. Adhering to the visual style that Chartier identified and that many subsequent authors associate with *film noir*, both movies include a large number of scenes set at night and make use of expressionist low-key lighting.[8] More importantly, they are uncanny and oneiric; as Todd Erickson says of the *noir* crime movie, they 'distort . . . psychological reference points . . . [giving us] psychological access [to a] nightmarish underworld' (1996: 309–10). In *Si muero antes de despertar* the protagonist processes his experience in a nightmare reminiscent of the dream sequence Salvador Dalí created for Hitchcock's *Spellbound*. And the protagonist of *Rosaura a las diez* says repeatedly, 'Sueño mucho' ['I dream a lot'] and 'No sé si estoy soñando' ['I don't know if I am dreaming'].

The two films also treat a motif that many scholars regard as central to *film noir*: gender. Attention to this aspect of *film noir* began in 1946, when Chartier included among his catalogue of unsavory characters '[w]omen as insatiable as the Empress Messalina . . . [and] young guys ready to kill for the sexual favors of a femme fatale' (1999: 23). Borde and Chaumeton noted the presence in *film noir* of a 'new kind of woman, rubbing shoulders with and masterminding crime, tough as the milieu surrounding her' (2002: 9). Frank Krutnik sees the 1940s tough thrillers as reflecting a crisis in 'the very determination of the hero's identity—as a unified subject: as a man' (1991: 42) and states that in the United States the entrance of women in the workplace during the war 'set in motion a temporary confusion in regard to traditional conceptions of sexual role and sexual identity, for both men and women' (1991: 57). In Argentina, also, women assumed increasingly visible roles during the 1940s and 1950s, and many films reflect this.[9] *Si muero antes de despertar* and *Rosaura a las diez* do so in their innovative treatment of gender.

Christensen's movie adapts 'If I Should Die Before I Wake' by US 'hard-boiled' mystery writer Cornell Woolrich (writing under the name of William Irish), 'one of the founding literary fathers of *film noir*' (Nevins 1999: 137) and 'the prime exponent of the psychological suspense thriller' (Krutnik 1991: 49).[10] In the story, an eleven-year-old protagonist, unable to convince his police-detective father or his teacher that a female classmate is in danger, goes alone to an isolated house to save her from a child molester. Although Christensen's film keeps the basics of the Woolrich plot, it makes changes that, besides adapting the story to an Argentine setting, make its ending more credible and alter its treatment of gender in a progressive manner.

Christensen's film reflects the growing awareness of psychoanalysis that critics have identified as an aspect of *film noir*.[11] This is evident in the ire that Detective Santana (Florén Delbene) expresses towards people that, influenced by psychological theories, consider child molesters victims and

or Borde and Chaumeton, whose use of the term *film noir* is based on analogy with the expression *roman noir* or 'black novel' referring to publisher Gallimard's crime series, for Chartier, *noir* is defined only by negative connotations. He groups *The Lost Weekend* with *Double Indemnity*, *Murder, My Sweet* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* because all are films about 'monsters, criminals and psychopaths without redemptive qualities' (1998: 23).

4 He states, 'The essential question is no longer "who-done-it?" but how does this protagonist act?' (1999: 16). This shift in emphasis, he notes, is accompanied by 'another, purely formal change in expository style, the intervention of a narrator or commentator [which] permits a fragmentation of the narrative, to quickly gloss over the traditional plot elements and to accentuate the "true-to-life" side' (1999: 18).

5 Chartier joins Frank in acknowledging (in a negative tone) the new movies' focus on psychology and use of voiceover, and his description of *Murder, My Sweet*'s 'play of twisted shapes, which . . . [recalls] the experiments of "pure cinema", of the presentation of a nightmare and disturbed vision in the manner of the old

school of avant-garde filmmakers' (1999: 23) suggests an unenthusiastic view of its cinematography.

6 As Naremore observes, Borde and Chaumeton repeatedly describe *film noir* with 'five adjectives typical of Surrealism: "oneiric, strange, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel". The second adjective – *insolite* in the original French – is especially important . . . [and is related to] Freud's "uncanny"' (2002: xiii).

7 Maranghello, who rarely assigns films to categories, praises *Si muero antes de despertar* and *Rosaura a las diez* for their quality but does not classify them (2005: 118 and 152–154). Goity, whose essay appears in a book on Argentine cinema through 1956, does not discuss *Rosaura a las diez*, which premiered in 1958. She calls *Si muero antes de despertar* a 'melodrama policial' ['crime melodrama'] and acknowledges that films in this category have much in common with *film noir*. She endeavours to distinguish the two categories by suggesting that the *melodrama policial* lacks *film noir*'s 'desdibujamiento' ['blurring'] or 'permeabilidad de los límites entre el bien y el mal' ['permeability of the boundaries separating good from evil'] (2000: 407). The problem with this distinction is twofold. On one hand, it fails to acknowledge that the protagonist's

in a dream sequence in which the movie's young protagonist Lucho (Néstor Zavarce) sees fairy-tale characters change into monsters.

Lucho's nightmare is a vivid portrayal of his world, which has been invaded by menacing forces. It also recalls the movie's opening sequence, which presents an image of a merry-go-round populated by fairy-tale characters and monsters while a voiceover declares that children are eternally obliged to confront and defeat evil. Original to Christensen's film, the nightmare and the images and words of its introductory sequence anticipate the movie's plot in which Lucho – whose name brings to mind the verb *luchar* [to struggle] – struggles against evil. And in yet another departure from Woolrich's story, the movie makes it apparent that the enemies Lucho confronts are internal as well as external. Lucho's external enemy – already a part of the Woolrich short story – is a pedaphile who preys on young girls. His internal enemy is a code of disdain for females that he adheres to at the beginning of the movie but rejects at its end.

The starting point in the Woolrich short story for this aspect of the film consists of various comments its narrator and protagonist, Tommy, makes regarding girls. Tommy states, for example, 'Me and the fellows used to tease [the killer's first victim] . . . just because she was a girl', 'you can't ever break your word, not even to a dumb thing like a girl', and, 'I didn't want Eddie Adams to see me talking to a girl' (Irish 1945: 11, 12, 13). The story presents these remarks as characteristic of an eleven-year-old boy and does not elaborate them further. An early sequence of Christensen's film keeps this aspect of the Woolrich narrative by showing Lucho teasing the killer's first victim, his classmate Alicia Miranda (Marta Quinitela), by pulling her braids and dipping them in ink and by showing his and other male students' reluctance to be seen talking with girls. But, unlike the story, the film explores this aspect of the protagonist's behaviour, showing that it forms part of a social code that is inculcated by adults.

In Christensen's film, for example, Lucho dismisses the importance of receiving a failing grade in grammar by stating, 'La gramática es cosa de mujeres. Todas las chicas la saben'. ['Grammar is for women. All the girls know it'.] His father agrees: '[E]n eso de la gramática tienes razón. Cosa de mujeres'. ['About grammar you're right. It's for women'.] Lucho's mother (Blanca del Prado) collaborates in indoctrinating him. Following Alicia's disappearance, Lucho, who has sworn to his classmate not to tell about the man who gave her candy and whom he saw her leave school with, becomes panic-stricken. Instead of consoling him, his mother tells him, 'Duérmete como un hombre'. ['Go to sleep like a man'.] When Lucho asks desperately if he may break an oath he has sworn, she continues to inculcate gender indoctrination, reminding him of his father's tenet: 'Un hombre sin palabra no es un hombre'. ['A man who doesn't keep his word is not a man'. Literally: 'A man without a word is not a man'.]

This answer, which stresses the supposed maleness of keeping one's word, contrasts with the one the protagonist of Woolrich's story receives. When Tommy asks if he may break his oath, his father replies, 'No . . . never.

Only stool-pigeons tell and welshers' (Irish 1945: 14). In the Woolrich story, to speak will make Tommy a stool-pigeon or welsher. In Christensen's film it will make Lucho unmasculine. It is easy to see the connection between the masculine prohibition of speech and the assumption that grammar – the basis of language – is feminine.

Christensen's movie makes the code of 'male' silence crucial to the plot. In his study of *film noir* and masculinity, Frank Krutnik writes, 'Woolrich's novels are . . . obsessed with the pain and trauma generated when men renege upon their obligations to be "tough"' (1991: 43). In contrast, in *Si muero antes de despertar* pain and trauma are generated because Lucho's parents convince him that he must be silent in order to be masculine.

After the disappearance of a second classmate, Julia Losada (María Angélica Troncoso), Lucho tries to speak but – unschooled in grammar – vocalises an incoherent outburst that school authorities interpret as insubordination and that his father punishes by locking him in his room. Lucho escapes from his confinement and embarks on a search for his missing classmate, guiding himself by marks she has left with coloured chalk that he knows the murderer gave her. Following Julia's trail through dark streets, Lucho enters a labyrinth at whose centre he confronts a monster whose strength exceeds his own. Both Lucho and Tommy are saved by their police–detective fathers, whose sudden appearance, Nevins observes, Woolrich 'makes not the slightest effort to explain in rational terms' (1988: 158). In Christensen's film, in contrast, Lucho lets his father know where to find him. He not only follows Julia, he also follows her example, copying from her a grammar of communication. Aware that his father will not realise the significance of her chalk marks, Lucho translates them: he creates a second trail by tearing brass buttons from his coat and leaving them, like fibres from Ariadne's thread, for his father to follow.

In *Si muero antes de despertar* Lucho triumphs over his internal monster. At the beginning of the film he adheres to the gender code his parents inculcate. He avoids talking to girls and teases them in ways that make him, like the murderer, a torturer of females. Most importantly, he allows the gender code to silence him. By the end of the film, however, he gives new meaning to the phrase, 'Un hombre sin palabra no es un hombre'. ['A man without a word is not a man'.] He breaks his silence because, like the Theseus of mythology, he accepts the lead of a woman. Christensen's *Si muero antes de despertar* is remarkable for its lucid questioning of gender codes. It is because Lucho learns to question these codes that he triumphs over his monster.

The protagonist of *Rosaura a las diez* also confronts a monster – a feminine one reminiscent of the *femme fatale* whose role in many *films noirs* has, as noted, been the subject of critical commentary. Soffici's film distinguishes itself, however, by presenting the *femme fatale* as a fictional creation. Following the Marco Denevi novel it is based on, *Rosaura a las diez* presents the story of a timid restorer of paintings, Camilo Canegato (Juan Verdaguer), who sends himself love letters from 'Rosaura' (Susana Campos), an imaginary

dilemma in *Si muero antes de despertar* is, precisely, that his barriers between good and evil have become blurred and permeable. On the other hand, to insist that permeable boundaries between good and evil are an essential aspect of *film noir* would eliminate from the corpus many films – such as *Phantom Lady* (Robert Siodmak, 1944) and *Murder, My Sweet* – that are universally recognised as *noir*.

Interestingly, two other Argentine scholars, María José Moore and Paula Wolkowicz, do not classify *Si muero antes de despertar* either as *film noir* or crime melodrama but as a horror film and group it with other films (including *El vampiro negro*/*The Black Vampire* [Román Viñoly Barreto, 1953], classified by Goity as *film noir* [2000: 407]) that 'configuran la presencia de lo monstruoso, de lo "otro" que irrumpe en la civilización y tiende a desestabilizarla' ['give form to the presence of the monstrous, of "otherness", that irrupts in civilisation and tends to destabilize it'] (2005: 62). Their divergent classification is not troubling, as the 'flexibility of genre definitions' (Bordwell and Thompson 1993: 81) is acknowledged even in introductory texts.

8 Place and Peterson's 'Some Visual Motifs of *Film Noir*' presents a concise analysis of

techniques frequently associated with *film noir*'s visual style. While it is important to acknowledge with Krutnik that these innovations are not unique to *noir* movies and that 'in terms of their visual style a number of key films in the "*noir* corpus" are resolutely classical' (1991: 19, 23), they are present in many *noir* movies, including the two considered in this essay. Goity comments on *Si muero antes de despertar*'s use of off-angle composition and on the darkness and shadows in the protagonist's home, where '[s]ólo el teléfono, que reiteradamente anuncia las malas noticias, recibe una fría luz cenital' ['only the telephone, which repeatedly announces bad news, is bathed in cold overhead light'], and notes that the cinematographer was Pablo Tabernero, who was known for his 'amplia experiencia en creación de iluminaciones expresionistas' ['extensive experience in creating expressionistic lighting'] (2000: 472–73).

9 As Maranghello notes, during these years female characters 'irán conquistando lugares de trabajo antes reservados al hombre' ['gradually occupy jobs previously reserved for men' ('Cine y estado' 2000: 118).

10 Borde and Chaumeton state, 'The immediate source of film noir is

woman he invents to make himself appear more attractive to his landlady's daughter. 'Rosaura', however, materialises and leaves Camilo ensnared by his own invention and eventually accused of her murder.

Soffici's film, which is more disturbing than Christensen's, employs *noir* techniques that *Si muero antes de despertar* does not. These include the distorting use of wide-angle lenses, a practice that makes 'faces or objects . . . bulge outward', and anti-traditional *mise-en-scène* with 'disruptive and unnerving . . . off-angle compositions of figures placed irregularly in the frame [to] create a world that is never stable or safe, that is always threatening to change drastically and unexpectedly' (Place 1996: 66–68). Although both movies use voiceover, they do so in different ways. In Christensen's film, a single, authoritative voice explains Lucho's actions. In contrast, *Rosaura a las diez*'s use of multiple voices is illustrative of the 'fascination with narration' that J. P. Tellotte sees as characteristic of *film noir* and of its 'desire to speak of discourse's problems and potentials' (1989: 218).

The voices of Soffici's film belong to four characters who, in a manner that recalls *Rashomon*, speak from divergent points of view and present conflicting accounts of events. The first speaker is Señora Milagros (María Luisa Robledo), Camilo's landlady, who tells a police investigator that her boarder received mysterious, perfumed letters that – pilfering through his possessions – she learned were from Rosaura, a young woman he met when he restored her deceased mother's portrait. Señora Milagros says that Camilo and Rosaura fell in love but that Rosaura acquiesced to her father's demand that she stop seeing him, then fled from her home to the boarding house, where she appeared unexpectedly at 10 P.M. and where she and Camilo celebrated their wedding.

Señora Milagros is interrupted by a boarder, David Réguel (Alberto Dalbes), who angrily accuses Camilo of murdering Rosaura and recasts in a sinister light the events his landlady narrated earlier.

Then Camilo speaks, telling the police investigator that he invented Rosaura to make himself more interesting to his landlady's attractive daughter and that, following Rosaura's materialisation, he became trapped in a nightmare that he had himself devised.

The last voice belongs to a murdered prostitute, María Correa, who, in a letter written before her death, explains that she went to a former client, Camilo, to ask for money to flee from '*el Turco*' [the Turk], a criminal whose anger she provoked, and that when she got to the boarding house where Camilo lived, she discovered he had reinvented her as Rosaura.

This letter, which the police recover from Señora Milagros's maid, who stole it, convinces the police that '*el Turco*' killed Rosaura/María Correa and that Camilo is innocent. Probably most of the film's spectators accept this conclusion.[12] It seems questionable, however, to accept as evidence a letter that – like the now discredited ones that inspired Señora Milagros's mistaken deductions – purports to be from Rosaura. It is important to note, moreover, that all the letters in *Rosaura a las diez* have been stolen – the first ones by Señora Milagros and the last one by the boarding house

maid. The reiterated motif of stolen letters calls attention to the similarity between *Rosaura a las diez* and Poe's 'The Purloined Letter', an early prototype of the mystery narrative that established norms that all subsequent contributions to the genre repeat.

In the case of *Rosaura a las diez* the repetition of the Poe story is striking in its detail. As Jacques Lacan emphasises in his Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter', Poe's narrative consists of two parts in each of which a character hides a letter and another character finds it. *Rosaura a las diez* echoes this structure: in its first part, Camilo hides letters and Señora Milagros finds them; in the end, the maid hides a letter, which the police find.

Lacan, who glosses 'The Purloined Letter' as an illustration of the repetition automatism, declares that the story illustrates differing ways of seeing (1988: 32). In *Rosaura a las diez* the four narrators perceive the same events from contrasting perspectives, which reflect different literary genres. For Señora Milagros, Camilo and Rosaura's story is a melodrama; for David Réguel it is an adventure narrative in which he, the hero, rescues a female victim; for Camilo it is fantasy; and for the inspector it is a police procedural.

Rosaura a las diez transcends all these genres and is a case study in repetition. In it four witnesses repeat the same events, giving them conflicting interpretations. The movie's structure and its emphasis on the concealing and discovery of letters is a repetition of 'The Purloined Letter'. Rosaura's name is repeatedly changed – named Rosaura by Camilo, she receives a false identification document from '*el Turco*' as Marta Córrega, and police identify her as Marta Correa. The last version of her name repeats almost entirely the second one. The motif of false or misleading identification cards repeats that of false or misleading letters – just as the first syllable of *carnet* [identification card] repeats the beginning of *carta* [letter]. And Camilo is a restorer of art – that is a painter who does not create original works but retraces or repeats the brush strokes of existing ones. His portrait of Rosaura is, as one of the characters observes, made from – a repetition of – a photograph. And true to his vocation, he seeks to make himself attractive to his landlady's daughter by inspiring in her mimetic desire – by enticing her to repeat Rosaura's feelings for him.

In doing so, he overlooks the fact that, as Lacan observes, 'Repetition demands the new' (1981: 61). Claiming to quote Pirandello, he attributes to artists the ability to 'fijar la fugacidad de la vida' ['to fix the flux of life']. But his understanding of Pirandello is flawed. In *On Humor* Pirandello, whose fictional creations in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* resemble Rosaura because they assume wills of their own, states that life 'is a continual flux which we *try* to stop, to fix in stable and determined forms' (1960: 137, my emphasis). Elsewhere, he notes that there is an 'inherent tragic conflict between life (which is always moving and changing) and form (which fixes it . . .)' (1952: 367). Camilo's ordeal results from the fact that his creation is not fixed or static. In a process of transforming repetitions, his portrait of womanhood as a rose's aura becomes a *femme fatale*

obviously the hard-boiled detective novel of American or English origin' (2002: 15). Woolrich's contribution is particularly important since his narratives were more frequently adapted to film than were those of Cain, Chandler and Hammett. The 67 film versions of his fiction include three made in Argentina: Klimovsky's *El pendiente* and Christensen's *Si muero antes de despertar* and *No abras nunca esa puerta/Don't Ever Open that Door* (1952).

'If I Should Die Before I Wake' appeared in *Detective Fiction Weekly* in 1937 and was republished in 1945 by Avon in a William Irish collection (Nevins 1988: 158, 307). Nevins refers briefly to *Si muero antes de despertar* in his biography of Woolrich (1988: 474) but does not discuss it there or in 'Translate and Transform'.

11 See, for example, Borde and Chaumeton 2002: 18–20, and Krutnik's chapter entitled '*Film Noir* and the Popularisation of Psychoanalysis', 1991: 45–55.

12 Domingo di Núbila, for example, despite noting *Rosaura a las diez*'s similarity to *Rashomon*, concludes that the last letter 'revela la verdad' ['reveals the truth'] (1960: II 228).

and eventually a battered prostitute. His experience illustrates the futility of trying to fix the feminine in any category.

The film's director shows greater understanding than Camilo. Although he too copies a previous work – Denevi's novel – he thrusts viewers into a world of instability and flux. Instead of a portrait, he offers a moving picture in which, although frozen in time, 'Rosaura at Ten O'Clock' is in flight – from '*el Turco*' and from viewers as well.

Soffici's movie is a fugue, and its reprise of Rosaura as *femme fatale* is uncanny and destabilising. Reading it in the context of *Rashomon*, of the purloined letters, and of Camilo's misrepresentation of Pirandello's remarks, we cannot allow the film a naïve ending – or even allow it to end at all. Considering Rosaura's renaming as Marta Córrega and then as Correa, we may be reminded that truth is, as Lacan affirms, 'that which runs [Spanish *corre*] after truth . . . like Actaeon's hounds, after . . . the goddess's hiding place' (1981: 188). Instead of offering a traditional ending, Soffici's film leads viewers on a chase that invites them to glimpse a relationship joining the seductive and murderous huntress Diana – prototype of the *femme fatale* – and truth. Rather than tying up all lose ends, the *dénouement* (literally untying) of *Rosaura a las diez* leaves its viewers threads that may lead them to discover truth as movement and revision.

To make this discovery they must, like Lucho, become open to grammar. Few will do so. For the human subject is, as Pirandello observes, most comfortable with what is fixed or set. We yearn to shut ourselves off from dialogue.

Si muero antes de despertar and *Rosaura a las diez* are remarkable because they resist these temptations. Instead of projecting a fixed vision of gender as many *films noirs* do, they introduce us to an ongoing process of revision.

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Reviews

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The Cinema of Alex de la Iglesia, Peter Buse, Núria Triana Toribio and Andy Willis (2007)

Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press,
210 pp., ISBN 978-0719071362 (hbk), £50

This book starts with a hatchet – a trick hatchet, buried in the head of one of the characters from Alex de la Iglesia's *Crimen ferpeccto.* This odd motif serves in fact to set the tone for the whole book, strewn as it is with examples of popular culture often at its most tacky which, as the authors of *The cinema of Alex de la Iglesia* demonstrate time and again throughout their study, give way to complex readings that link de la Iglesia's rowdy celebration of popular cultures to an established artistic tradition that we do not immediately associate with films like these (the hatchet, for instance, has links to images of martyrs in 15th- and 16th-century art). This subversive complexifying of the popular has been done before by writers on Hispanic cinema. What is different this time is that de la Iglesia flaunts his unsubtle tackiness in a way that seems positively to discourage co-optive academic critique. One of the successes of this book is to provide thoughtful academic analysis of the director's films while keeping his ethos more or less intact.

The authors relate de la Iglesia's work to debates about the auteur and the popular, considering the director as part of a team. While they detect a move 'away from the subcultural' (p.13) in terms of actors and music (more recent films have drawn on more established actors and stars and have used music less obtrusively than before), the production team has nonetheless remained consistent, explicitly purveying a cinema of spectacle, which the authors argue is a radical move in Spain if not in Hollywood. Before embarking on a film-by-film analysis, they pick out motifs that characterise de la Iglesia's work, specifically the use of masks and mannequins, and the intervention of a modernity which breaks with the past though not always with tradition (as with the hatchet with which we began). They touch lightly on the question of Basque cinema (a question that sometimes arises in discussion of de la Iglesia given his Basque origins) and of gender: in the work of de la Iglesia these are neglected by the director out of indifference rather than hostility.

De la Iglesia started from the premise of attacking literary adaptations, or films about the Civil War, or about childhood – all prevalent in the cinema of the earlier democratic era – through mass cultural forms such as comic books and in the case of his first film, *Acción mutante*, through the use of a genre normally unassociated with Spanish cinema, sci-fi. In this

film sci-fi is quoted ironically, pointing to the failings of its imagined future. The film also swipes quotes from other genres to provoke a sense of discontinuity: in particular it demonstrates a complex relation to the films of Almodóvar, both debunking and imitating the latter's characteristics of style and theme. Although this is a film which does not treat women too kindly it does not pander to the desires of the male gaze, but rather uses the exploitation of the female body as a critique on the privatisation of TV, a critique that provides another intermittent motif of the director's work. It can, for instance, be found in de la Iglesia's next and probably best-known film, *El día de la bestia*, a film that the authors argue is also about misreadings, specifically the misreadings of Anglo-American scholars that neglect the film's comic elements in favour of conservatism and pure horror. Spanish scholars appear to do better, suggesting that the correct interpretation of a cultural vehicle depends on where you are positioned in relation to it. In *El día de la bestia* the baleful influence of the media can only be seen – or read – by those on the margins, as is the case with the pernicious influence of class, marked in the film through the elements of music (heavy metal) and costume. Both this film and the previous one feature a kidnapping, and so does the next, *Perdita Durango*: but the latter film is distinguishable from its predecessors by the fact that the kidnappers are not the error-prone misfits of before but romantic heroes, making this film something of an oddity in de la Iglesia's work. The humiliation and harming of the body that could be found in *Acción mutante* recur as well in *Perdita*, and the authors link this to a remark by the actor Alex Cox that de la Iglesia shows a certain distaste for the embodied presence of the actor. Clearly this distaste would be somewhat attenuated when de la Iglesia came to his later *cine de actor*.

The critique of TV returns to the fore in the authors' analysis of the next film, *Muertos de risa*, a retro comedy that links TV to popular memory, specifically of 1970s Spain, the drabness of which period is reflected in the costume and look of the film, the flamboyant TV outfits of the central characters notwithstanding. The anarchy of the double act of protagonists Nino and Bruno is not overtly political, in keeping with the director's disavowal of overt political statements within his films, but it is nonetheless shaped in part around the politics of the 1970s and its censorship clampdown, as well as the real fear of violence on the part of the regime. TV here forms a shared experience of popular culture that serves to unify national memory, enhanced by the use of archive footage of the events of 23-F, that allows us to perceive not only the obsolescence of Nino and Bruno's stage routine but also the military values of the past. Although this hardly goes against the director's earlier disavowal of Civil War filmmaking, it does suggest a potential shift in attitude towards the past which may reflect a more general change of direction, as his next two films imply.

If the violence of the earlier films revealed a distaste for the actor on de la Iglesia's part, his next film, *La comunidad*, has been appreciated more in

terms of acting than directing, as evidenced by its Goya nominations: the use of old-guard actors such as Carmen Maura and Emilio Gutiérrez Caba is a new move for the director. The authors link this film to the ensemble cast of the *sainete* tradition and films of the same ilk such as Luis García Berlanga's, with cluttered framing. The drab setting of the film is another throwback to the past despite the contemporaneity of the surrounding Madrid and the bright pink suit of central character Julia. Julia escapes this time warp only to end up in another, a bar that once more strongly evokes the past. *La comunidad* suggests the potential subversive value of 'those who are left behind by progress' (p. 137). If his approach towards actors seems now to have changed, so too does de la Iglesia's attitude towards child protagonists, if the next film *800 balas* is any guide. The authors perceive this film as an unusual indulgence in sentimentality and thus an oddity in the director's work: the child's gaze removes the usual irony and parody. *800 balas* includes another figure familiar from Spanish cinema alongside the child, and that is the castrating mother figure from which the son must escape, in order that the missing father might be reconstructed and ultimately idealised – suggesting, then, that de la Iglesia's perspectives on women can include hostility as well as indifference. The film also contains a critique of the film industry that follows on from the earlier sideswipes at TV: the focus here is co-production, a hallmark of the contemporary Spanish industry, which has a human cost in the form of the stunt team who cannot move on from their roles.

De la Iglesia's final film at the time of writing was *Crimen ferpecto*, and the authors use this film to review the director's trajectory thus far, linking this latter film to its predecessors. Unfortunately they do this to the neglect, at times, of more detailed discussion of the film itself: a thorough consideration of the central female character Lourdes would have been particularly welcome, as would a discussion of the actress who plays her, Mónica Cervera. Such an analysis would have rounded out the portrait offered of the director's use of actors, and offered further nuances about his attitude to women. The chapter devotes much of the analysis of the film itself to the setting of the department store as a performance space, a theatre of mass consumption in which the characters are the performers, and performing precisely to deceive: a clear link, then, to the previous *800 balas*.

This volume serves as a valuable introduction to the work of de la Iglesia for those studying and researching contemporary Spanish cinema at all levels. If only the book was not so expensive at £50! For it is a vital resource for both study and the teaching of contemporary Spanish cinema, and a cheaper price would make it more accessible to lecturers and students alike. The question of the book's affordability should not, however, detract from the quality of the analysis and argument it contains, moving forward the debate about a director who has become key to the Spanish cinema of today.

Reviewed by Ann Davies, Newcastle University

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Ann Davies is a lecturer in Spanish at the University of Newcastle. She has published widely on aspects of Spanish film, including the recent study (with Chris Perriam) Carmen: from Silent Film to MTV (Rodopi, 2005). She is presently working on the Basque/Spanish film director Daniel Calparsoro. Contact: Dr. Ann Davies, School of Modern Languages, Old Library, Newcastle University, Newcastle NE1 7RU, UK. E-mail: ann.davies@newcastle.ac.uk

Spanish Visual Culture: Cinema, Television, Internet, Paul Julian Smith (2006)

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Paul Julian Smith locates the studies which make up this characteristically substantial contribution to Spanish (and Transatlantic) Cultural Studies in the context of a turn to visual culture. In plotting this turn himself over the past fifteen or so years, Smith has been developing an extraordinary critical ability to address so many of what he calls in relation to Alejandro Amenábar here the 'subjective dispositions [and] objective conditions' (p. 121) which animate cinema, its makers and consumers. As his title indicates, film is joined here by other media, although in crude terms more than half the coverage is still of cinema – this book needs to be read alongside, for example, his *Television in Spain: From Franco to Almodóvar* (Tamesis), also published in 2006. The digital artwork *La fábrica* of Marisa González (part real installation/exhibition, part virtual) and the multimedia art of Zush allows Smith to trace a 'persistence of identity' in the former, which is in productive and committed tension with abstract networked art-and-data flows (pp. 148–9) and to posit a mirroring in the work of the latter of the kind of network enterprise which, in an 'Hispanic rereading of [Manuel] Castells' (p. 137), Smith, through models of correspondence, associates with the Spanish state. In both these digital projects there is a further 'persistence', that of location; and this is one of the three linked themes of the collection, arguably the pivotal one to emotion and nostalgia, the other two. Location is both expanded and refined throughout (as localities, studio sets, film locations, commercial territories of distribution, places of memory, abstract spatialities). Analysing television dramas *Médico de familia* (TVE, 1995–99) and *7 vidas* (Tele 5, 1999–2006) for their presentation of distinct dimensions of the everyday, urban, family and elective family spheres Smith highlights a mapping of something like nation-specific sentiment in the one and of an urban sensibility with a cosmopolitan lift in the other, using ideas on re-evaluating female subjectivity from feminist oral historian Luisa Passerini subtly to frame his argument (but, as so often with his preferred format of concatenated essay-length studies, he has to do so with tantalisingly brevity). The primacy of location in *Historias del Kronen* (dir. Pedro Armendáriz, 1995), and an exploration of the body and the city (as well as cinematic technicality), give this film a convincing nudge back into the critical limelight a decade on, in Chapter 4. Locality and (loosely) the transnational

are mixed brilliantly with a retake of academic discussions of the cinematic remake in chapter 6, on *Abre los ojos* (dir. Alejandro Amenábar, 1997) and *Vanilla Sky* (dir. Cameron Crowe, 2001). In Chapter 8 (separated from 5 because of the intervention of discussions of Castells, for the internet chapter) a deep analysis of 'Hispano-Mexican' production contexts and practices, and commercial trends, is sharp on 'objective conditions'. Topped with Castells (globalisation, identity, institutions of the state) and tailed with Bourdieu (field theory), the chapter constructs a flexible model for thinking about the interplay of forces and agencies in what elsewhere crudely has been conceived as a polarity of cultural protectionism and globalising innovation within a spirit of compromise. The products of Alejandro González Iñárritu and Alfonso Cuarón, Altavista and Anhelo, show a 'new alignment of aesthetics and economics' (p. 174) and this book positions itself precisely at that alignment. On *Juana la loca* (dir. Vicente Aranda, 2001), in chapter 5, there is an economic edge to Smith's interrogation of heritage, belonging and authenticity and a commitment to rigorous aesthetic judgement and response in his attention to the look and the techniques. The film's incoherence and contestedness, he argues, make it more neurotic (p. 112) than its eponymous heroine. Many of the book's best acts of locating have to do with perturbation: from 'edgy shooting styles' in the Mexican films (p. 11) to mourning in *Hable con ella* (dir. Pedro Almodóvar, 2002) and, in the words of Martha Nussbaum, who centres the discussion of the Almodóvar film and TVE's series drama *Cuéntame cómo pasó*, 'the disorderly operation [of emotions] in daily life' (p. 16). Thus Almodóvar's newly 'hermetic and self-referential "universe"' is prised open by emotion as cognition while the television series' uneven way with historical memory is realigned, essentially, once a phenomenology of love is recognised as being at work in the process of regular (and devoted) viewing. In these eight case studies, 'the particular brilliance of their visual culture' (p. 11) is appropriately and resonantly used by Smith to make the ethical connection between place, history and response across these media.

Reviewed by Chris Perriam, University of Manchester

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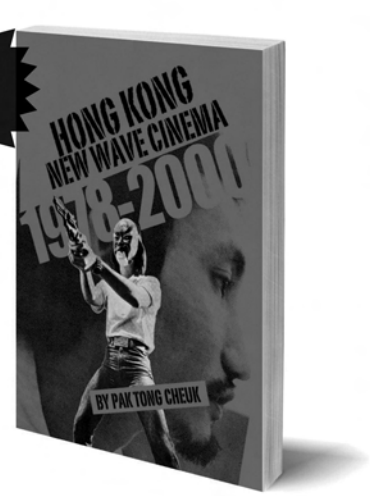

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Introduction

73–78 Disintegrating pictures: Studies in early Spanish film
David George, Susan Larson and Leigh Mercer

Articles

79–90 Fear at the hands of technology: The proto-Surrealism of the films of Segundo de Chomón
Leigh Mercer

91–106 Cinematising the crowd: V. Blasco Ibañez's Silent *Sangre y arena* (1916)
David George

107–119 Nemesio M. Sobrevila, Walter Benjamin, and the provocation of film
Susan Larson

121–130 Two takes on gender in Argentine *film noir*
Currie K. Thompson

Reviews

131–135 Ann Davies and Chris Perriam

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9 771478 048009 42

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